The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN'S Mystery Magazine

a new story by
GEOFFREY HOUSEHOLD
To Die With Decency

APRIL 35¢

Helen McCloy

Victor Canning

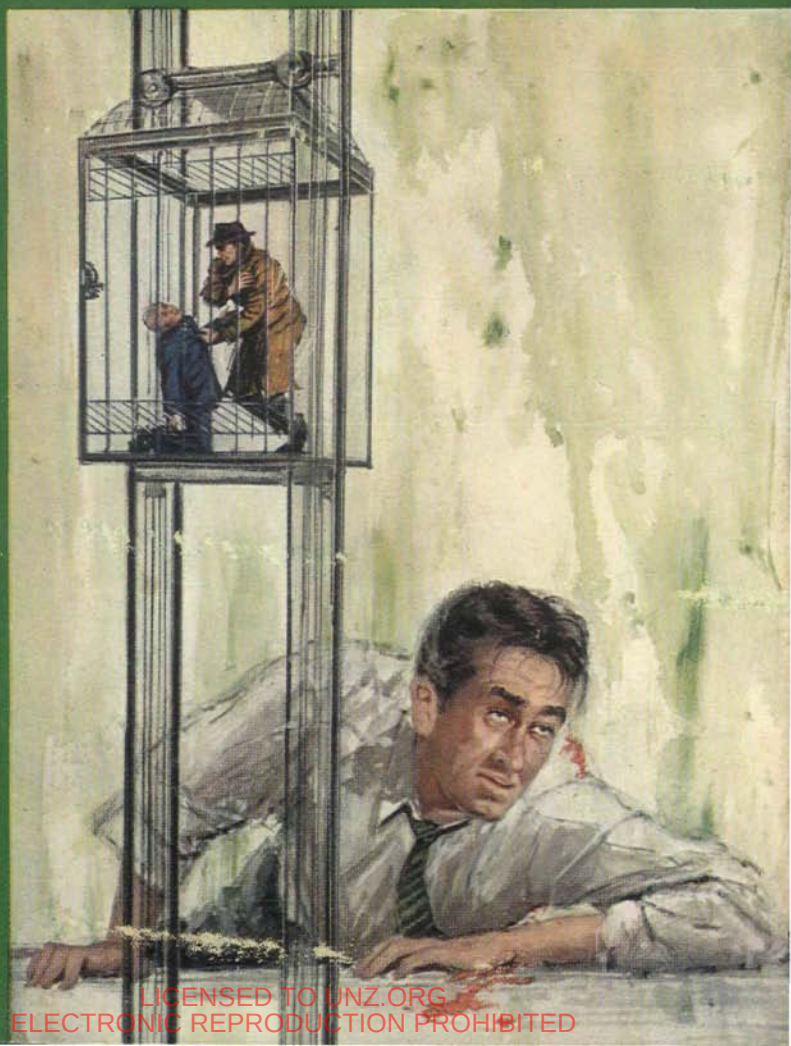
Matt Taylor

Henry Slesar

Rebecca West

Thomas Narcejac

James Holding



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The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN'S
Mystery Magazine

including **BLACK MASK MAGAZINE**

Printed in 7 editions—American, Australian, English, French, Italian, Japanese, & Portuguese

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PUBLISHER: *B. G. Davis* EDITOR: *Ellery Queen*

Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Vol. 37, No. 4, Whole No. 209, APR., 1961. Published monthly by Davis Publications, Inc. at 35¢ a copy. Annual subscription $4.00 in U.S.A. and possessions and Canada; $5.00 in the Pan American Union; $5.00 in all other countries. Publication Office, Concord, N. H. Editorial and General offices, 527 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y. Change of address notices, undeliverable copies, orders for subscriptions, and other mail items are to be sent to 527 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y. Second-class postage paid at Concord, N. H. *© 1961 by Davis Publications, Inc. All rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright Convention. Printed in U.S.A. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.*

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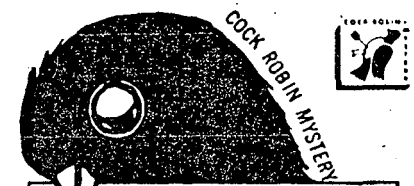

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a new story by

GEOFFREY HOUSEHOLD

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: GEOFFREY HOUSEHOLD

TITLE: *To Die With Decency*

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Italy

TIME: 1944

COMMENTS: *"There was no telling where the generosity of wine ended and Andalusian pride began." But murder is never far away from inordinate pride . . . a distinguished story.*

THE ONLY MURDERER I EVER KNEW was a personal friend. Yet I had to admit that his sentence was absolutely just, legal, and merited. Even the Military Police were kind to Valdes. They assured him that it did not hurt at all to be executed by a firing squad. Valdes politely agreed with them—not that he cared about pain. He was as used to that as a retired boxer, and looked a little like one, too.

He wanted to live as eagerly as the rest of us, but he realized that his death, like any other military ceremony, had to be performed with dignity. He was a soldier all through. He made one understand the character of that handful of men who conquered the Americas. Yet the luck of war had landed him in a noncombatant unit.

He was an Andulusian, sturdy, of middle height, and with the type of face which the Spaniards call *chato*—looking as if it had been flattened out by a steam roller and come up smiling. It must be common in the Peninsula. I had three other toughs with much the same lack of features.

Valdes had fought right through the Spanish Civil War and been interned in France at the end of it. In 1940 some of those internees were evacuated before the Germans could grab them and formed into a Spanish commando. A good idea on paper. What they didn't know about bloodshed wasn't worth knowing. And yet their commando was unusable—too fierce, too desperate. They hadn't the flair of the British for discreet, deadly action.

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When the Spanish commando was disbanded, Valdes, with a few of his mates, was posted to the Pioneer Corps. What an outfit that was! We had plain laborers recruited from Africa or obscure islands in the Indian Ocean, and able-bodied poor of every color in need of work and regular rations, and always some Q men, as they were called—habitual army criminals who had learned by experience and low cunning to anticipate the psychiatrist's next move and to get themselves registered as psychopathics. My own company was a mixture of Arabs, Q men, and vaguely oriental beachcombers. Corporal Valdes and his section of Spaniards formed a solid island of sanity and hard work.

In 1944 the company was with Eighth Army in Italy, cleaning up close behind the advance. My main trouble was Italian hospitality. The men were not accustomed to red wine in that quantity. Valdes and his Spaniards, who were, acted off duty as nursemaids in the cafés. The amount of murder and theft those fellows prevented was astonishing. They were proud of the reputation of the British Army—yes, proud of it, even in the Pioneer Corps. For them there was no other army in the war at all.

"My captain," Valdes said to me one night, "we cannot all be in the Guards. But we wish to assure you that we know how to die with decency."

They were going out beyond the front line with a Field Company of sappers to fill up craters in a mountain track which was going to be badly needed the next day. It was late in the evening when they volunteered for the job, and they were all, I suppose, at the third liter; but there was no telling where the generosity of wine ended and Andalusian pride began.

Pride. Perhaps murder is never very far from it. There didn't seem room for either when one morning I sent Valdes and his section down to the railhead to collect a consignment of picks and shovels. Nothing but picks and shovels—but to Valdes they were Toledo steel. I had seen him use them under shell fire with such nonchalance that even the Q men didn't find an excuse to run back to safety.

That hardware was important to my Spaniards—so important that when a young French sergeant told them to get the hell out of the way and let him load his truck with warlike stores they ignored him. Unfortunately Valdes, after two years of internment, spoke French. Unfortunately, too, he had that unreasonable Spanish contempt for his neighbor across the northern frontier. At last he told the French sergeant to pipe down and wait his turn.

The sergeant replied that he was not going to wait for any noncombatant sons-of who were not even fit to shovel—well, you can imagine

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the number of uses that an angry and imaginative Frenchman could find for a shovel. Valdes did not lose his temper. He rose to the occasion with dignity and developed his favorite creed—that if there were no shovels, the luckier men who had fighting to do would never get near enough to the front line to do it. The Frenchman (so much we had in evidence) remarked that all the British Army ever did was shoveling while their allies did the fighting.

Corporal Valdes quietly picked up a rifle belonging to the French detachment and shot the sergeant dead.

It was astonishing how correct and soldierly Valdes' movements then were. The only authority handy was the railway transport officer. While the startled Frenchmen were busy with their sergeant, Valdes marched up to the R.T.O., saluted smartly, gave his name and unit, handed over the rifle, and reported the incident. The R.T.O. wiped the sweat off his elderly brow—he had been naturally disconcerted by the approach of a murderer with a loaded rifle—and sent for the Military Police. The section, still an island of proud discipline, returned to camp.

There was nothing I could do. If it had been a British soldier he had shot, I think I might have got the court-martial sentence reviewed and had Valdes punished by a long term of imprisonment. But he had shot an ally, and allies were touchy. It was more essential for the war effort that Valdes should die than that the French should suffer a sense of grievance.

He admitted as much himself. He did not regret the murder at all; he only regretted that it had been unavoidable. He pointed out that he had paid no attention to personal insults, but that an insult to the British Army was not to be borne. For three years, he said, we had treated him as a friend and a gentleman. The least he could do in return was to defend our honor.

I was determined that Valdes should not be executed. Somehow I, a mere captain, reached the French G.O.C. I speak reasonable French—that and a bit of Arabic and the remains of several tropical diseases were my qualifications for the Pioneer Corps—and I nearly won him over. I insisted that there was no need to prove Valdes mad; to shoot an unknown and gallant Frenchman he must be mad.

The general was exquisitely courteous. He knew that these were mere empty words, but they pleased him. Speaking for himself, he said at last, Valdes could be reprieved; but for the sake of the suffering mothers of France and the damned politicians—he dared to couple the two together with the irony of a man who was absolutely sure of himself—he regretted that he could not interfere.

I came to a dead end.

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I tried the corps psychiatrist—with whom, thanks to the curiosities among my Q men, I was on excellent terms. He told me that Valdes had the only faultlessly healthy human mind he had met in years, and that if hard scientific lying could help him, helped he would be. He did his dishonest best, but the big shots above him refused to play. About ten per cent. of my company had deserved a firing sqaud at some time, and they were tired of finding excuses for their behavior. They refused to distinguish between Q men and emotionally primitive Spaniards.

I had no military ambition. I was just a gray-haired captain, only fit enough for the Pioneer Corps. So my plans for saving Valdes were quite uninhibited. I seriously considered every trick one reads of in fiction—down to supplying the firing squad with blanks and bribing them to say nothing. But not a single one of my ideas was practicable.

Valdes' section was equally desperate. They took it for granted that I was on their side. Their experience of impossible escapes in the chaos of civil war was to the point, but such plans in a more formal army were unworkable. Private Moreno, who was some sort of relation of Valdes from the days when they had possessed homes and wives, wanted to get inside the jail and substitute himself for the condemned man. He couldn't very well be shot instead, and a court-martial—always merciful when its collective sense of humor was aroused—was unlikely to give him more than a year.

I thought about it night after night. I even trained Moreno to imitate Valdes' voice and accent. But he was more than an inch too tall; and though he did have a similar type of squashed and wrinkled features in the same tint of deep tan, common sense insisted that one could never be mistaken for the other unless they were heavily made up or bandaged, and then only in a crowd of Arabs or Englishmen.

Valdes was in the jug at Bari. I used to drive down and see him whenever I had a spare moment and could invent a reasonable excuse. On what would have to be my last visit, two days before he was due to be executed, I ran into the corps psychiatrist being let out through the formidable gate as I was being let in.

"Another of your beauties," he said to me.

"Who is it this time?"

"Pidgegood. There's nothing wrong with him whatever except that he knows as much of our routine as I do. You can have him back when he's served his sentence."

Myself, I knew all along that there was not a trace of maladjustment in Pidgegood; he had merely been born without a sense of shame. But it had taken a long time for overconscientious psychiatrists to

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realize that jail was the proper place for him. He was a gipsy, or said he was. He had found in peacetime that wild eyes and dirt and a general air of rural eccentricity always intimidated housewives and farmers, and he trusted that the military were just as easy.

They were. Pidgegood couldn't read or write, but he had the cunning of the devil to make up for it. By the time he had been dismissed from his battalion as an incorrigible and cowardly rogue, he knew enough psychiatry to fool any solemn doctor. He put on an act just sufficiently unbalanced to make sure that his crimes would land him in a mental ward rather than a cell, but not enough to get him invalided out of the service. He preferred the army—what little he saw of it—to being drafted into a factory.

Courts-martial had no effect whatever on him; he always came back to me with a careful letter of advice from the psychiatrists. But my chaps found a use for the man. If there were any inquiries about missing pigs or chickens and no chance of the company's innocence being believed, they always put the blame on Pidgegood. He was perfectly willing to accept it, even on the rare occasions when he wasn't guilty, and was rewarded by privileged idleness.

I was far from fond of him, but he was a part of my company. So I asked to be escorted to his cell and went there before my visit to Valdes. It was going to be the last time I should see my corporal, and I knew I should want to be alone afterward.

Pidgegood would talk of nothing else but Valdes. He reproached me to my face with not getting him off. There wasn't a man in the company, he said, whatever his color, who wouldn't have died for Valdes, except me. I didn't attempt to explain. Pidgegood never understood the army machine.

"Have you seen him?" I asked.

"Gawd, yes! We runs round the yard together."

They did not have a condemned cell, you see. Firing squads were hardly ever used in the humane army of the last war. I suppose the proper procedure for dealing with Valdes was laid down, but it was not a matter of everyday experience and nobody wanted to be too formal.

And then, corrupted by the mere presence and criminality of Pidgegood, I suddenly saw a remote chance.

"Do you want to go back to the psychiatric ward?" I asked him.

"They won't 'ave nothing more to do with me," he said.

"Ever tried attempted murder?"

"Not worth it. Touch one of them warders and they'll 'alf kill you and swear it was done resisting constraint."

"It wasn't one of them I meant," I explained.

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He got it. He got it instantly. His gipsy mind took him right to the point before I had done more than feel for it myself.

"I couldn't do 'im any 'arm with my bare 'ands," he said, "before they'd separate us."

We were alone in the cell. The warder was outside, but he didn't bother to supervise interviews between a prisoner and his long-suffering commanding officer. I took a handkerchief from the pocket of my battle-dress trousers and blew my nose, looking away from Pidgegood. When I had replaced the handkerchief and done up the button I noticed that the familiar lump against my thigh, which was my powerful pocketknife, had disappeared. I swear I felt nothing. It only occurred to me later that the unaccountable loss of several of my treasured possessions had always taken place when that scoundrel was with the company.

"The face, if possible, Pidgegood," I said, getting ready to go. "And if there is anything I can do for you at any time, you know I will."

"Thank you, sir. But I reckon I won't be coming back to the company this time."

Then I went on to see Valdes. There was a sergeant of Military Police present throughout the interview, and I couldn't drop a hint of what was brewing. When I left the cell I returned Valdes' salute with the tears running down my face. I was sure I would never see him again. Pidgegood seemed a frail ally against the imposing formality of military justice.

Not till the morning when Valdes, we all assumed, had been executed did I hear what had happened. The Spaniards of his section came babbling into the orderly room all at once and for the first time in their lives had to be reminded by a roaring and indignant sergeant-major that they were soldiers.

Did I know the news from Bari? No, I didn't. Valdes had been attacked in the exercise yard by Pidgegood and carved up with two strokes of a knife. The first had slit him from mouth to ear and taken the ear three-quarters off; the second had ripped open the artery of his left arm. Did I know that it was not the custom to execute a hospital patient? Did I know that he must be nursed back to health before he could be shot?

I showed as much pleasure as could be expected from an unemotional company commander and asked how Pidgegood had come by a knife. That did not seem to bother anybody. Pidgegood could not be imagined without a knife. They forgot the regular searches of cell and person. In fact, it was very fortunate that Valdes, Pidgegood, and their fellow criminals had been doubled out for exercise within a few hours of my visit.

Through the correct channels I

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asked whether it was permissible to visit Valdes in the hospital, not being quite sure whether he was officially dead or not. Nothing against it. He was very glad to see me. His head was swathed in bandages, and the pale oak color of his face had changed to yellow. He could not understand what had come over Pidgegood. He assumed that the doctors must have been right about him after all.

Military justice was now following all the rules of the game. Valdes had a guard continually at his bedside—or at least playing cards not more than three beds away. He was not even allowed to attend to the needs of nature alone, though his escort remained outside the swing door. I took a fatherly interest in all these arrangements. I also took note of the exact measurements and windings of his bandages.

I gave liberal leave to the Spaniards of his section—with the exception of Moreno. The hospital doorkeepers became accustomed to their cheerful arrivals and chattering departures. Valdes soon looked his normal self and color. The surgeons, knowing what was in store for him when they released him, kept him as long as they mercifully could, and even wasted time in removing the scar of Pidgegood's knife—or mine, rather—by the latest plastic surgery. But at last the week arrived when he had to be passed fit for execution.

I allowed four of the section to take a company truck and pay Valdes a goodbye visit. I met the truck on the road and put Moreno in the back of it, holding a saint of painted wood on a rather large base representing a rock. Inside the base was a sort of cap made of bandages on the thinnest possible mold of plaster of Paris. It needed only one more winding and a safety pin to be an exact replica of Valdes' bandage. Parcels brought by visitors were examined at the door, so we had to use this subterfuge. We felt sure the saint would have no objection to taking part in an errand of mercy.

Beyond providing the party with very precise orders, which I made them learn by heart, I had nothing else to do with the proposed felony. Whatever happened, I knew they would never give me away or even refer to the matter again.

At 14.15 hrs. the detachment passed the lavatories on Valdes' floor. Moreno whipped the cap out of its hiding place and entered No. 3 lavatory. The rest went straight on to Valdes' ward and presented him with the saint.

At 14.18 hrs. Valdes, accompanied by his guard, also entered No. 3 lavatory, sidling in and not opening the door too wide. It was a stable door, but so long as Valdes and Moreno kept their heads down they could not be seen. We simply had to trust that the guard would not look under the door and see four feet instead of two.

Valdes put on Moreno's battle-

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dress and shoved his bandages in the pocket. Moreno put on the cap, and Valdes' pajamas. Groaning a little and holding his tummy to disguise his height, he trotted back to bed and dived in.

His four visitors made a little doleful conversation and said an emotional goodbye. Then they picked up Valdes and drove like hell for our camp, passing close behind the French sector of the front where they dropped their corporal. I wasn't sure that I had not been too impudently ingenious there. But the plan worked. After all, the last place anyone would look for Valdes was among the French.

He changed into ragged civilian clothes—also provided in the truck—and spent the night crawling through the French forward positions until he was sure that only enemy patrols were ahead of him. Next morning, pretending to have escaped from a German labor battalion, he came in. The French believed him, or said they did. They were always short of good men and pretty unscrupulous how they recruited them. Six hours later Valdes had enlisted in the Foreign Legion.

Moreno had a much better run for his money than we ever thought he could. He kept up the deception till dawn of the following day and very gladly accepted what I had prophesied—two years reduced to one when the sentence came up for revision. The others swore that they had never known that the man in bed was not Valdes, and the prosecution just failed to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that they did.

Pidgegood enjoyed a happy and idle war in the mental home. As for me, the worst I had to bear was an interview with my colonel who told me privately that I was strongly suspected of knowing more about the escape of Valdes than I had stated in evidence. He had sworn to my character and assured the military detectives that their suspicions were impossible.

"It's an immoral trade," he said, looking me straight in the eye. "One becomes far too fond of one's subordinates."

●

WESTERN-CRIME STORY IN EQMM WINS NATIONAL AWARD—

Steve Frazee's "All Legal and Proper"—March 1960 EQMM—has been named the "Outstanding Western Short Story for 1960", with both the author and magazine receiving the National Cowboy Award from the Cowboy Hall of Fame and Western Heritage Center, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**JAMES HOLDING**
TITLE:	***The African Fish Mystery***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVES:	Leroy and Danforth ("Leroy King")
LOCALE:	South Africa
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Another "adventure in deduction" by two mystery-story collaborators who are very close to your Editors' hearts . . .*

IT WAS MERELY A CHANCE REMARK of their driver's that led to what King Danforth and Martin Leroy later described as one of the most stimulating exercises in deduction they were privileged to enjoy during their entire round-the-world vacation trip with their wives. And unlike *The Norwegian Apple Mystery,** it was not a case of sudden death that precipitated their discussion, but a case of sudden wealth—which, as any good gossip columnist can tell you, is far from intriguing.

The two mystery-story writers, known to millions of fans simply by their collaborative name of "Leroy King," had left their cruise ship *Valhalla* at Cape Town and embarked with their wives on an inland tour of Southern Africa by car, intending to rejoin their ship at Durban. And they were sixty miles out of Pretoria on the smooth road to Machadadorp when their driver, Ralph Muir, making idle conversation, remarked to King Danforth in the front seat beside him, "I hope you'll turn out to be as lucky as a passenger I drove earlier this year, Mr. Danforth."

"How's that?" Danforth asked.

"When we got back to Johannesburg from the trip I drove him on, he came into a great fortune and went home to live in England."

"I could stand the fortune," Danforth said wryly, "but Scarsdale is okay with me."

"What was his name?" Carol Danforth inquired from the back

*See EQMM, *November, 1960*

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seat. Her dark eyes sparkled with interest.

"A Mr. Duke Carrington," Ralph replied.

"Duke." Helen Leroy laughed. "That puts him a little lower in the scale of royalty than you are, King".

Leroy nudged his lovely blonde wife and grinned. He was small and dark and intense. "Don't flatter King, dear," he urged. "He's all but insufferable now." But there was affection in his voice.

Carol said idly, "What kind of fortune, Ralph?"

"Some relative in England," said Ralph, "died and left Mr. Carrington a large estate. There was a letter of notification waiting for him when we got back to Joburg. Everybody in town was talking about his inheritance within a day or two."

"A likely story," Danforth said idly, too. "I suppose he mentioned his rich relatives to you during your trip together?"

"No, he didn't," Ralph said. "On the contrary, I gathered the impression he was quite alone in the world."

Leroy squinted out the side window at three almost naked black children who were patiently watching over a herd of cattle beside a gaily decorated Ndebele village. "Tell me, Ralph," he said. "Did Mr. Carrington seem very flush after you got back to Johannesburg?"

"He was the talk of the town," Ralph said. "Living very high off the hog, for him. I understood the solicitors in England advanced him a bit of his legacy."

Danforth turned his head and met Leroy's eyes. He rubbed a speculative hand across his crew-cut. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking, Mart?"

Leroy grinned. "I am. Was there ever a hoarier chestnut than the sudden wealth bit after taking a trip somewhere?"

"Please watch your language, Martin," Helen said with dignity.

He ignored her. "We've used it ourselves, King, a dozen times. In *The Color of Blood* and *The Baronet's Bullet,* to mention only two."

Carol pretended to groan. "Here we go again," she said. "More plotting by the world's champions. Are we in for another busman's holiday, Helen?"

Leroy said penitently, "We'll forget the whole thing, Carol. Fishy as it sounds, eh, King?"

"Fishy as it sounds," Danforth agreed solemnly.

"It doesn't sound fishy to me," Helen said. "What's fishy about a man inheriting a fortune? Happens all the time."

"So soon after taking a mysterious trip? And telling people ostentatiously that he has suddenly become the lucky heir of some vague relative in England?"

"Why not? Anyway, there wasn't anything mysterious about the trip, was there, Ralph?"

Muir grinned. "Not a thing."

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At this point the black sedan in which they were traveling breasted the slope of one of Africa's rolling green hills, and the engine sputtered for a moment, misfiring several times before resuming its purr of power.

"Whoops," Danforth said. "A fouled spark plug."

Leroy said, "Sounds like a little dirt in your carburetor, Ralph. Or your gas line."

Carol said, "For my money, we're about to run out of gas."

"It's nothing to worry about," Ralph reassured them. "Happens every once in a while, like a chronic cough. There's nothing wrong with the plugs, carburetor, or feed lines that I can find. And we aren't running out of petrol, either, Mrs. Danforth. If we do, I have an extra five-gallon can stowed in the boot. So rest easy."

"All right," Carol said. "But I'm sorry Mr. Duke Carrington's fortune was a phony."

"Who said it was a phony?" Leroy protested.

"All we imply is," Danforth said, "that the inheritance gag was a phony. Not the fortune."

Carol sighed with mock resignation. "Well, go ahead and figure it out, boys. Helen and I will sit here and admire your cerebration along with the scenery."

Leroy leaned forward and tapped Danforth on the shoulder. "Begin, my dear fellow," he said encouragingly.

"Very well," Danforth said with a quick smile that made his battered features very attractive. "First, Ralph, did Mr. Carrington take the same trip we're taking? Johannesburg, Pretoria, Kruger Park, Hluhluwe, and so on?"

"Oh, no. It was a different trip entirely—not a regular tour like yours." Ralph looked through his windshield into the sunny distance of the high veldt, and his eyes took on a reminiscent gleam. "My instructions were to pick up Mr. Carrington at the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg and drive him anywhere he wanted to go for as many days as he paid the car hire. I was to take a tent, sleeping bags, mosquito nets, and some food supplies in case he wanted to camp out in the bush as we went along."

"Camp out? Then I suppose you drove a Land Rover or Jeep?" Leroy suggested.

"No. We drove this car. He didn't expect to get into really trackless country."

"Where'd you go?" King asked.

Ralph said, "It turned out to be a fishing trip. Mr. Carrington told me to keep as close to the Vaal and Orange Rivers as the roads allowed, as far as the mouth of the Orange, while he did a little river fishing. Something he'd wanted to do ever since he'd been in South Africa."

"Pardon me if I parade a bit of erudition," Danforth said, "but there's something slightly fishy with that fishing story, I think. Accord-

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ing to a large pamphlet on the Transvaal I recently read, there's much better fishing in any number of places than in the Vaal and the Orange."

Ralph shrugged. "I was told to drive him anywhere he wanted to go."

Leroy said, "Did Mr. Carrington go fishing every time you camped near the river?"

"Yes, if he thought it a likely spot."

"Did he stay long at any one place?"

"No. We did our regular hundred and fifty to two hundred miles a day in the car. Mr. Carrington only went fishing after we stopped for the night."

"I see," Leroy said. "Or rather, I don't see. Why all the rush to make two hundred miles a day, just for a couple of hours' fishing in the evening?"

"We had a long way to go," Ralph explained patiently, thinking his American passengers a strange lot. "The mouth of the Orange is nearly a thousand miles from Joburg."

"Why," asked Helen, "go so far —just to fish in the evenings?"

Ralph shrugged again.

Danforth asked, "What did this Carrington do for a living? Did he have a job?"

"Yes," Ralph said, skillfully nursing his car through another small fit of chronic coughing, "in Johannesburg. He worked at one of the gold mines on the Rand."

"Ah," Leroy said complacently. "Gold. Makes you think, doesn't it?"

"It does," said Danforth. "It makes me think that perhaps Carrington was mixing some gold prospecting with his fishing. And struck it rich."

Ralph entered into the spirit of the game. He shook his head. "I don't think so, Mr. Danforth," he said. "He never brought any ore samples back from the rivers. Just fish."

"The absence of ore samples wouldn't mean anything," Leroy muttered. "Not if he was looking for placer gold. That he would find in the river itself—in the form of nuggets or dust."

That sounded quite logical to Helen. "I'm proud of you, dear," she complimented her husband. "And now that we've got that settled, let's stop for lunch some place before I suddenly starve to death before your eyes."

"Only a few more miles to Machadadorp," Ralph promised. "We can eat there, at the Hydro-Baths Hotel. It's very pleasant."

When they re-entered the car after an excellent luncheon, Danforth was clutching a large Mobilgas road map of South Africa. And having exchanged places with Leroy at the noon break, he now sat between the girls in the back seat.

He spread his map and studied it conscientiously for several miles.

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as Ralph Muir headed the car down the road to Nelspruit and White River. Finally, Danforth addressed his partner blandly, "You were saying, Mart, that perhaps Mr. Carrington discovered a pocket of placer gold while fishing?"

"Could be," Leroy said.

King said, "It occurs to me that a gold prospector—supposedly Carrington in this instance—always uses a miner's pan of some sort to separate the gold from the river gravel?"

Leroy nodded thoughtfully. "Ask him," he said magnanimously. "You thought of it."

Danforth said, "Well, Ralph, did your Mr. Carrington have, among his personal effects, a miner's pan or batea, as I believe the device is sometimes called?"

Ralph said, "Sorry to disappoint you, but no. Not a sign of one."

"There goes an excellent theory," Leroy mourned.

"However," Danforth persisted, "I have another avenue to explore with Ralph that may prove productive."

Carol said, "Move your map a minute, darling, so I can see out the window. We're coming to orange groves, I think. How heavenly!"

King folded the map obligingly. "Ralph, did you actually reach the mouth of the Orange River?"

"We did, sir. And stayed there for four days. Camped on the south shore of the outlet. Mr. Carrington fished and I loafed."

"Was the fishing very good?" Danforth asked.

"It wasn't anything special," Ralph replied.

Danforth took a deep breath. "Didn't it strike you as peculiar, Ralph, that Carrington should want to drive two hundred and fifty miles out of the way merely to reach the river's mouth where, by your own testimony, the fishing was nothing special? And then should want to stay there *four days?*"

Ralph looked a bit taken aback. Leroy said, "What do you mean, 'two hundred and fifty miles out of the way'?"

"The map shows no auto roads along the Orange River west of Pella," Danforth explained. "The only way you can get near the river's mouth by car is to take a big detour south through a town called Springbok, and then north again along a dead-end coast road to the place where the Orange empties into the Atlantic."

"And thank you, Mr. Lowell Thomas," Carol murmured admiringly, rolling down the car window the better to sniff the delicious fragrance of orange blossoms that permeated the countryside.

"That's right, Mr. Danforth," Ralph admitted. "That's exactly the route we took."

King said, "Are you sure Carrington did nothing but fish at the river's mouth? It seems evident to me that he went there for some other purpose."

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Ralph insisted. "I had him in view practically every minute. He favored the inside of the sand bar that lies across the river's mouth, and since the river was low, he'd stand on the pebble beaches of the small islands that stud the river's mouth and cast from there. By the hour. The water was quite shallow."

Suddenly Leroy, in the front seat, reached back a hand demandingly. "Lend me your map, King." He took the map, opened it, frowned down at it for a moment, then folded it with a flourish. "I begin to see daylight, children," he said softly. "But Ralph gave me the lead."

"Me?" asked Ralph, surprised.

"Your mention of pebble beaches has awakened the sleeping giant that is my brain. Harken." He paused, as though to let them hear his brain whirring. "Girls, what is Africa famous for besides gold?"

"Elephants," Carol replied promptly.

"Not elephants. Something more precious."

"Lions," Helen said. "I think they're precious."

"By Jove!" Danforth exclaimed. He leaned forward to pat Leroy approvingly on the back. "I believe you're right! Diamonds, of course."

"It *has* to be diamonds," Leroy said.

"A girl's best friend," said Helen with enthusiasm. "Let us start immediately for the mouth of the Orange River. If there are diamonds there, I want to go fishing with Duke Carrington!"

"King Solomon's Mines!" Carol offered. "Is that where they were?"

Leroy shook his head. "The other direction, Carol. Sheba's Breasts, the mountain peaks that Rider Haggard described as marking the spot, are supposed to be in Swaziland, I believe."

"Talk about parading erudition," Helen said, "you do collect some of the oddest information, darling!"

"Anyway, Rider Haggard only dreamed up King Solomon's Mines to prove he could write a more exciting story than Stevenson's *Treasure Island*," Danforth commented. "Please, ladies, look at the scenery for a bit while your husbands handle this matter of the diamonds in an orderly fashion. Martin?"

"Where," Leroy asked didactically, "are the most famous diamond fields of Africa?"

"Kimberley."

"Right." Leroy sighed happily and handed the map to Danforth. "Look where the Vaal River flows."

Danforth looked. "Why, of course! Close to Kimberley."

"Within a few miles. And it's not too much to believe, is it, that the Vaal might wash some diamonds out of the earth it flows through, and carry them with it as it joins the Orange River?"

"And the Orange carries them right along to the ocean!"

"Head of the class. There must be deposits of diamonds at the

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mouth of the Orange River. Not gold. Diamonds."

Ralph Muir spoke up. "Alluvial deposits? Nothing new about them. For three hundred miles along the coast of South West Africa, they've been working open-pit alluvial diamond mines for years."

"I didn't know that," Leroy said. "But actually it helps our theory. There *are* diamonds washed to the coast by rivers. And Carrington, being a knowing fellow—perhaps a mining engineer?—figured he might pick up some loose diamonds on the island beaches where the Orange meets the sea."

"Mixed with the pebbles, eh?" Ralph chuckled. "I suppose it's remotely possible." He looked at the writers curiously. "That never occurred to me," he said, "and I live here."

Leroy was modest. "You have to have a feeling for these things."

Danforth said, "It takes a special kind of mind," and grinned at his partner. "Let's see how the diamond theory stands up under searching scrutiny. Ralph, did you notice that Carrington stooped frequently while fishing the mouth of the Orange?"

"When he wanted to change lures or take a fish off the hook, he'd squat on the beach. Naturally."

"And picked up diamonds," Helen said. "Some fish!" She wrinkled her nose. "But wait. Can you tell a rough diamond when you see one?"

Ralph answered that. "Yes, you can. They're usually rather rounded and greasy in appearance, greasier than a pebble. With maybe one flat side." He began to smile broadly and Leroy noticed it.

"What's funny?"

"Nothing, really. I was just remembering that the Star of South Africa, a fabulous diamond, was found on the bank of the Orange River."

"Why didn't you mention that sooner?" Leroy grinned.

"Never thought of it. Back in the seventies, just after it was found, there were ten thousand prospectors along the banks of the Orange and the Vaal, I've heard. But that's all over now."

"Not for Carrington," Danforth said. "He picked up a fortune in diamonds. And he disguised his trek to the river mouth as a fishing trip to keep you from knowing what he was really up to. When he got back to Johannesburg, he probably disposed of a diamond or two on the black market to celebrate his good luck, then circulated the inheritance story to account for his sudden wealth."

"But why all the secrecy?" Helen protested. "Why not tell the world about his diamond windfall?"

"Probably wanted to come back for more diamonds if he ever went broke," Danforth speculated. "Didn't want anybody to know where he found them."

"Another possible reason," Ralph

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suggested, "is that Carrington could have been taking his diamonds direct to London, where he'd get better prices from the cutters for his parcel of stones." He grinned. "Just a thought."

"And thank you for it, Ralph," Leroy said. He leaned back in his seat and relaxed, filled with a pleasant sense of accomplishment. "Q.E.D."

"Not quite," Danforth disagreed. "One thing still needs explaining. After Carrington accumulated his store of diamonds at the river's mouth, where did he conceal them for the trip back to Johannesburg with you, Ralph? Must have been quite a bundle to hide."

"Not in the car," Ralph said positively. "We unloaded the boot every evening—even took out the car seats to sit on. I handled all the equipment every day—rod cases, tackle box, food supplies, everything. Nothing concealed."

"How about a money belt?"

Ralph shook his head. "No money belt. And not in his pockets. He only wore shorts and a shirt."

"Well, confound it, think!" Danforth said with pretended impatience. "They must have been somewhere."

Ralph steered expertly around a sharp bend. "If you'll forgive me, Mr. Danforth," he said with an apologetic expression, "I don't think there *were* any diamonds. Mr. Carrington took a fishing trip, and he found he'd inherited a fortune when we returned to Joburg. That's all."

Danforth laughed. "Didn't you notice anything out of the ordinary on your return trip to Johannesburg?"

"Not a single thing. Unless you'd call a fresh hole in Mr. Carrington's mosquito net out of the ordinary?"

Danforth sat erect. "Very suspicious. How'd that happen?"

"He burned it with a cigarette."

"Did you see him do it?"

"No. He told me afterward."

"How big a hole?"

"Six inches across, I suppose."

"Was it charred at the edges as though from burning?"

"I don't remember."

"So," said Leroy who had been thinking as he listened. "The whole thing explains itself. Did you run out of gas anywhere on the way home, Ralph?"

"Yes. Once."

"And did Carrington pour your spare gasoline into the tank from your emergency can?"

"Yes, he did. I was getting some water out of a stream nearby to fill the radiator."

"That does it," Leroy said. "It's quite simple, really. Carrington hid his diamonds in your spare can of gasoline, Ralph. And when, unexpectedly, you had to use the spare gasoline, he cut a piece out of his mosquito netting to serve as a strainer over the spout of the can —so the diamonds he'd hidden in it

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wouldn't tumble into your gas tank along with the spare gas. How's that for an idea?"

Ralph looked at him with admiration. "My word, Mr. Leroy," he said, "you *do* have an imagination, don't you?"

They stopped at the Hottentot Kop Hotel for dinner and the night. Perched on a high bluff, the hotel overlooked a magnificent panorama of green hills, fertile valleys, and distant mountains capped with the violet mist of approaching evening.

They ordered a lavish dinner, deliberately chosen by Carol and Helen in defiance of its caloric content; they drank a bottle of velvety South African wine with the meal and were very gay, the men proposing several toasts to their brilliant solution of what they decided to call *The African Fish Mystery*. And they were smoking a postprandial cigarette on the verandah, watching the darkening view, when Ralph Muir came running up the verandah steps and joined them.

His usually calm demeanor was illumined by an almost incandescent excitement. At their invitation he sat down between Helen and Carol and said in a voice he strove to make calm, "I've been working on the car. Wanted to correct that engine sputter before starting out tomorrow."

Helen said, "Did you find the trouble?"

"I found it, Mrs. Leroy." His words were tense. "It wasn't in the plugs, or carburetor or feed lines. It was in the petrol tank itself. Look!"

He held out a clenched hand, liberally blackened with grease, and opened it before their eyes.

"Pebbles," said Carol. "How peculiar." Suddenly her eyes widened.

"Not pebbles," Ralph announced. "Diamonds!" He gulped. "They were in my petrol tank! When one of them would shift on a rough bit of road over to the tank outlet, it blocked the flow of petrol for a moment and we'd get that engine sputter!"

They stared, fascinated, at the five rough diamonds in his hand. None was more than an inch in diameter.

King Danforth clicked his tongue deprecatingly. "We missed that," he told his partner gently. "It seems that Duke Carrington actually poured a few diamonds into Ralph's tank before he thought to use the mosquito net strainer!"

Leroy reached out and patted Ralph on top of the head. "You're rich, Ralph," he said. "Congratulations."

Ralph began to stutter something. But Danforth and Leroy weren't listening.

They were smiling at each other over their wives' heads with the pride and mutual respect of two small boys who have climbed unscathed to the topmost limb of the tallest tree in the orchard.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**HELEN McCLOY**
TITLE:	***The Black Disk***
TYPE:	Detective Novelette
DETECTIVE:	Reporter Alec Norton
LOCALE:	Pearson City, U.S.A.
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Murder of a second-rate actress in a second-rate hotel room—and the police said there wasn't a single clue to the killer's identity . . . A detective story in the grand old tradition.*

ALEC NORTON WAS STARTLED. HE could only echo his chief's words. "You want me to sleep in a room where murder has just been committed?"

"Why not?" The feature editor of the Syndicated Press stood in his office, his back to a window overlooking New York harbor. His head was dark against the pale winter sky. A grin tugged one corner of his hard mouth. "Afraid of ghosts?"

Alec gave him look for look. "Fun's fun, Chief, but I'm no detective. I'm a feature writer and—"

"You won't be a feature writer for long unless you learn to take assignments without squawking!" snapped the chief. "This may be a big story—bigger than you think. There have been too many unsolved murders in Pearson City lately."

"Okay, I'm a wage slave." Alec subsided, grumbling. "Let's have the dope."

"Diana Beauclerk was murdered in a suite at the Hotel Westmore in Pearson City. There were signs of a violent struggle—chairs overturned, blood on the rug, blood in the bathtub where the murderer appears to have washed his hands. But there were no clues—absolutely no clues of any kind."

The chief paused.

Alec responded slowly and distinctly, "No clues—boloney!"

"That's what I think. Where

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there's been a struggle there are bound to be clues. But the police have dropped the case. I want you to go to Pearson City and find out why—first-hand stuff for your modern crime series. Take the same train Diana Beauclerk took and get there at the same time. Go to the same hotel and occupy the same suite—1105."

"Will the hotel rent it so soon after the crime?"

"Why not? The police have finished with it. Besides, the number of the suite hasn't been published in any newspaper. To the hotel people, you'll just be an innocent tourist who happens to ask for that particular suite."

"Still, they may not want to rent it."

"That's your headache. Once inside, keep your eyes open!"

"For what?" Alec was growing more and more skeptical. "The police will have gone over every square inch of the place with a fine-tooth comb. The hotel people will have scoured and vacuumed it. Ten to one, it's even been redecorated!"

"There's always a chance they may have overlooked something," returned the chief. "I'm betting on that chance. Interview the bellboy and chambermaid who waited on Beauclerk. Study the topography of the suite. Soak up local color. Reenact everything Beauclerk did. Try to imagine you're going to be murdered yourself—between eleven p.m. and one a.m. the night you arrive."

Alec smirked. "Cheerful way to spend an evening!" A sudden thought wiped the smirk from his face. "Suppose the murderer should return to the scene of the crime!"

The chief's eyes gleamed. He spoke softly. "That is exactly what I'm hoping for. After all, the murderer is still at large. And the key to the suite is still missing."

On the train Alec refreshed his memory of the Beauclerk case by reading teletype flimsies—spot-news stories about the crime sent out by the *Pearson City Star,* a member of the Syndicate Press.

Diana Beauclerk was a second-rate actress living in New York. Two weeks ago she had gone west to Pearson City. Daniel Forbes, her divorced husband, lived there. So did the firm of lawyers who had got her the divorce, Kimball and Stacy.

She reached Pearson City at nine p.m. and went straight to the Hotel Westmore. She telephoned the junior partner of her law firm, Martin Stacy, and asked him to call at her hotel that evening.

At the time of her divorce Forbes had promised to pay her a lump sum in lieu of further alimony if she remarried. According to Stacy, she told him she was planning to remarry and she wanted him to ask Forbes for the lump sum. Stacy re-

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plied that it would bankrupt Forbes, who had just sunk all his money in a real estate venture.

Stacy said he left her suite at nine forty-five p.m. She was in good health and spirits, but still determined to get the money from Forbes. No one saw Stacy leave. No other visitor inquired for her that evening

Next morning she was found dead in her suite with a bullet from a .22-caliber Colt revolver in her brain. According to the medical examiner, she was shot between eleven p.m. and one a.m. Her door was locked and the key was missing. So was the gun.

When Alec finished reading he was sure that either Forbes or Stacy had killed Diana Beauclerk. Forbes had motive and Stacy had opportunity. Find a motive for Stacy or an opportunity for Forbes and the case would be solved.

The Hotel Westmore proved to be one of the older hotels in Pearson City, and definitely second-rate. Alec's first impression of the lobby was gloomy, Victorian dignity—black walnut and red plush, a black and white tiled floor, and Persian rugs.

He studied the night clerk as a man measures an adversary. "I'd like the room I had the last time."

"Certainly, sir." The clerk was young and limp, with a tired smile. "Do you recall the number?"

"It was 1105."

The clerk's smile congealed. "That suite is taken."

Alec's glance went to a chart of guest names and room numbers hanging on the wall behind the clerk. Opposite the number 1105 stood one word: *Unoccupied*.

The clerk's glance followed Alec's. "We have better rooms vacant now," he babbled. "Larger and more comfortable. At the same rate."

Alec's face was dark, blunt, and sulky. He always looked impertinent and he could look dangerous. He was looking dangerous now. He raised his voice. "Anything *wrong* with the plumbing in 1105?"

There was a sudden stillness in the lobby. Two women, who had been chattering like parrots, were struck dumb. A man, lighting a match for his cigar, paused until the flame burned his fingers. Even the bellboys on their bench were listening.

The clerk's eyes flickered. "Of course not!"

"Anybody with a contagious disease been in there?"

"No!" The clerk was almost hysterical. "It's just that—well, 1105 is being redecorated."

"I don't believe it." Alec leaned on the desk, holding the clerk's eyes with his. "Suppose you tell me the real reason," he drawled. "There might be a story in it."

"St-story?"

"I'm with the Syndicated Press,

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Feature Service. Either I get the story—or I get the suite."

It was blackmail and the clerk knew it. "There is no story," he piped tremulously. "Front! Show this gentleman to 1105!"

The stillness persisted as Alec followed a bellboy across the lobby to the elevator. He could feel eyes on his back. He wished it had not been necessary to announce the number of his suite quite so publicly.

The corridor on the eleventh floor was dimly lighted by electric globes at intervals of thirty feet. A thick, crimson carpet muffled every footfall. At the end of the corridor Alec noticed a door marked: *Fire Stairs*. It was a neat setup for murder.

The bellboy unlocked a white door numbered 1105. The room was dark but a neon sign flashed and faded beyond the window. A few snowflakes sifted down through that theatrical red glow, languid as falling feathers. Hastily the boy switched on a ceiling light.

The room looked normal and even commonplace. There was no hint of a violent struggle now. Deal furniture with a mahogany finish was neatly arranged as if it stood in the window of a department store. The blue rug was suspiciously bright and new. It had never been stained with blood. Table covers and towels were clean, ashtrays empty and supplied with fresh matches. The mirror over the bureau was a blank eye, round and innocent.

Alec played the part of an innocent tourist. "Is there anything wrong with this room?"

"N-no." The boy dropped his eyes.

"Afraid you'll lose your job if you don't keep your mouth shut?"

The boy raised his eyes. "Listen, mister. If you want my advice, pack up and take the next train back to New York."

"Were you on duty here two weeks ago?"

The boy hesitated. Then, "I'm not talking. But I wouldn't spend a night in here for a million bucks!"

He was in a hurry to get out of the room. Alec gave him a tip and let him go.

Alone, Alec examined the doors. There were three—one leading to a bathroom, one to the hall, and one to the room next door which was immovable—locked or bolted on the other side. Alec locked the hall door and put the key with his watch on the bedside table. It was just quarter of nine.

As he ranged his belongings on the bureau he noticed a film of white dust on the dark surface of the wood beyond the linen cover. Not gray like the dust that collects in an unused room, but white. Women didn't use white face powder nowadays, he recalled. They used pink, tan, or cream powder.

Alec glanced into the bathroom. *Blood in the bathtub where the*

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murderer appears to have washed his hands. It seemed clean now, but Alec decided against a bath. He crawled into bed and switched off the light.

In the darkness he could see the rosy reflection of the neon sign on the wall opposite the window. It winked as steadily as a metronome —on, off—on, off. In less than five minutes Alec was asleep.

He never knew just what woke him. Yet suddenly he was wide-awake. There was no sound and apparently no movement in the room except the noiseless pulsation of the red light on the wall.

He lay still, listening to the silence, watching the light. Somewhere in the city a big clock sounded twelve solemn notes—midnight. *According to the medical examiner she was shot between eleven p.m. and one a.m. . . .*

Alec heard a faint sound. His heart seemed to swell and knock against the wall of his chest. For the sound was inside the room.

He let his eyelids droop and breathed heavily, feigning sleep. The sound was coming nearer. A monstrous shadow fell across the illuminated wall, distorted and indefinable.

When the neon sign faded out, the shadow disappeared. When the neon sign flashed on, the shadow was still there. It stretched to an impossible height, climbing the wall to the ceiling. That meant that something between the light and its reflection on the wall was moving closer to the source of the light —in this case, the window.

Cautiously Alec tensed his muscles, ready to jump. The bedsprings betrayed him with a creak. The shadow vanished. Someone had moved beyond the range of the light from the window.

Abandoning caution, Alec leaped out of bed and groped for the light switch. Before he could snap it on, a stinging blow caught him in the ribs. He lashed out blindly with his right. There was a thick, squashy crack of fist on flesh.

Something hard grazed his knuckles. He put everything he had into the next and aimed down where the stomach ought to be. Rough cloth rasped his fist. There was a grunt, curiously inarticulate, like that of an animal in pain. Something heavy shook the floor as it dropped.

Alec waited a moment, on guard. Nothing happened. Again he groped for the light switch.

The blue rug had been rolled up and stacked in one corner of the room. On the bare floorboards a man lay face down. He had a short, heavy, powerful body.

Alec turned him over and discovered a round, lumpy face with narrow, slanting eyes—a primitive Tartar face from Russia or the Balkans. The man's shoes were too pointed, his overcoat too broad at the shoulders and too narrow at the waist.

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There was a slight bulge under the left armpit—a shoulder holster. Alec promptly removed the gun. He was familiar with this type. He had seen it in the lineup at Police Headquarters in New York, in Broadway night clubs and Seventh Avenue pool rooms, in the criminal courts. But he was surprised to meet it here. Diana Beauclerk had no connection with the underworld.

A professional gunman would not have killed her with a weapon of such small caliber as a .22. Nor would he choose a respectable hotel as the scene for a killing when it would be so much safer to take his victim for a one-way ride on a lonely country road.

The man's eyelids fluttered. He opened his eyes.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Alec.

The man made no reply. His eyes were dazed. His lips were bruised and swollen where Alec had hit him.

"Did you kill Diana Beauclerk?"

Alec expected an indignant denial, but there was no response at all.

"Oh, come on, snap out of it! Or I'll turn you over to the police!" The silence was getting on Alec's nerves.

The man opened his mouth, but no words came. Only that curious, animal grunting Alec had heard during their fight.

"Don't you speak English?"

The man opened his mouth wider. A forefinger pointed toward his gullet. Alec leaned forward to look. There were hideous scars inside the throat and the palate was mutilated. Apparently some terrible accident had destroyed the organs of speech.

For a moment pity and horror made Alec forget everything else. A moment was all the man needed. His right shoulder rose and a blinding blow crashed against Alec's jaw. Darkness was spangled with a rain of stars. Then there was only darkness . . .

Alec seemed to be swimming through heavy seas. He could taste salt water in his mouth and hear the pounding of the surf. His eyelids were made of lead. With a great effort, he lifted them. He was lying on the floor. The neon sign was turned off. A gray dawn lay beyond the window, but even that wan light seared his raw eyeballs.

The salt taste was his own blood. The pounding of the surf was the throbbing of his own pulse in his ears. Gingerly, his fingertips explored his jaw. It was swollen and tender but not broken. He clenched his teeth. None were loose. He had merely bitten his tongue when the blow fell.

He got to his feet. The floor tilted like a ship's deck in a storm. He clung to a bedpost. Slowly the floor settled back into place.

He looked about the room. No

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one else was there. The rug was still rolled and stacked in a corner. The furniture had been moved out from the walls as if the intruder had been searching the floor for some small object that might have lodged under the rug or between wall and furniture.

Nothing else was disturbed. Alec's belongings were ranged on the bureau just as he had left them. Bedclothes and mattress were intact. The cushions of the upholstered chairs were not even turned over.

Alec emptied his trouser pockets. Everything was there—return ticket to New York, gold watch, silver cigarette case, wallet containing seventy dollars in cash and three hundred in Travelers' Checks. An ordinary hotel thief would have made for those trousers the first thing.

Alec looked into the bathroom. Nothing was disarranged. He tried the door into the hall. Still locked. He tried the door that communicated with the next room. Also locked. The uninvited guest must have used a skeleton key—or the key that had been missing ever since the murder.

Alec picked up the phone. "Will you send some black coffee to 1105 as soon as the restaurant opens? And a morning paper—the *Star*."

He went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. The impact made him wince, but he forced his aching head under the stream of cold water with the rest of his body. He was going to need that head today. He alternated hot and cold water. Heroic treatment, but already his head and eyes were clearing.

He frowned as he noticed a drift of black dust on the shallow ledge where the white enamel of the tub ended and the white tiles of the wall began. His fingers drew white pathways through the dark film. He looked at his fingertips—lampblack.

A low, tuneless whistle escaped his pursed lips. Black dust on the white tub, white dust on the dark bureau could only mean one thing—fingerprint powder. In spite of the new rug and fresh towels, the suite had *not* been cleaned thoroughly since the police investigation.

Alec climbed out of the tub. A blast of cold air from the open window in the next room shivered his wet body. He slammed the door, grabbed a rough towel, and rubbed himself vigorously. A glow of warmth ran through his veins. He felt almost human again as he wrapped himself in a flannel dressing gown and slid his feet into leather bedroom slippers.

Hand on the doorknob, he paused. There was a sound of movement in the room beyond. A bellboy with coffee? Or the uninvited guest again? All he wanted was a chance to show that mug a thing or two! He balled his right

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hand and threw the door open with his left.

Abruptly he was conscious of bare shins and damp hair. A girl knelt in the middle of the room examining the floor.

"Oh." She rose. "I'm sorry. I must have mistaken your room for mine."

Her startled eyes were a deeper brown than her hair. There was character in the firm line of her chin, tenderness in the soft curve of her mouth. Alec appreciated both. But his eyes remained wary.

"Looking for something?" he asked.

"No. I just dropped my—my handkerchief."

She was lying. There was no handkerchief in her hand. Yet she didn't look like a sneak thief or a tramp. Everything she wore was the best of its kind—dark brown to match her eyes except for a tweed coat that matched the tawny brown of her hair.

She thrust one hand in a pocket of the coat and drew out a key with a hotel tag.

"This is my own key. It must fit your lock as well as mine." His unsmiling stare kindled a flush in her cheeks. "You don't believe me!"

"No." There was a ripple of amusement around his mouth.

"You're hateful!" She was through the hall door in a flash. It slammed behind her.

The ripple became a grin. But only for a moment. His face was sober enough as he began to dress. In less than twenty-four hours two people had searched for something in this room. And both had searched the floor—

As soon as he was dressed, Alec went down on his hands and knees. Now that the rug was rolled aside, he could see a dark, irregular stain in the middle of the floorboards. It was streaky where a half-hearted attempt had been made to remove it.

But nothing else about the floorboards suggested murder.

He was still studying them when someone tapped on the door.

"Coffee, sir!"

Alec scrambled to his feet. A bellboy came in with a tray balanced on one hand and set it down with a flourish. Then he pulled a folded newspaper from his pocket and laid it beside the tray. His blue eyes were bright as his brass buttons. He had sandy hair that curled close to his head. Alec fished a quarter out of his pocket and tossed it to the boy.

"Than*kew!*" But the boy missed the catch. The coin rang as it hit the floor and rolled away. The boy went down on his knees and scanned the floorboards Indian fashion, eyes level with the surface.

"Under the radiator!" He slid a hand back of the valve that connected with the pipe from the furnace. "Aw, gee, this ain't your quarter!" The boy held out his hand, palm up.

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A disk lay there, the size and the thickness of a quarter. It was round except for two slots opposite each other, shaped like tiny keyholes; and it was black, with a smooth, hard-rolled finish.

There were no fingerprints on it, only smudges.

Even in Alec's strong fingers it wouldn't bend. It weighed less than a quarter. When he dropped it on the table it rang faintly as it spun and settled. But it was not the shrill resonance of metal.

"What is it?" asked the boy.

"I don't know," answered Alec. "Never mind the quarter. Here's something better."

"Five bucks!" The boy eyed the bill Alec was peeling from his roll. "Gee!"

"That's not for bringing breakfast. That's for answering questions."

"But I ain't answered no questions."

"No. But you're going to." Alec smiled. "What's your name?"

"Gus—Gus Williams."

"Were you on duty here when Diana Beauclerk was murdered?"

The boy's face changed. "Are you a dick?"

"No."

"Then I ain't talking."

Alec held up the black disk between thumb and forefinger. "Ever see anything like this before?"

"No." Gus rubbed his curly head. "You think maybe it's a clue? Like in a book?"

"Might be."

"Then I don't want nothing to do with it!" Gus backed away.

"I know how you feel," said Alec. "The killer is still at large. I'm not sure he wasn't in this room last night."

"Last night?" A constellation of freckles stood out vividly as the boy's face whitened. "It couldn't be."

"Why not?"

"They got him last night."

"The devil they did!" Alec's hand went to his swollen jaw. "What time?"

"Nine o'clock. But they only give it to the papers this morning."

Alec's eyes searched the bellboy's face. "If the murderer is in jail why are you still afraid to talk?"

"Listen, mister. I ain't no hero. This here case is dynamite. I don't wanna be mixed up in it. If you know what's good for you, believe me, you'll leave it alone! I guess I've earned that five bucks by telling you so!"

He edged out the door. Alec turned to the morning paper.

STACY ARRESTED FOR BEAUCLERK MURDER

Pearson City, Tuesday, Jan. 17—Martin Stacy, junior partner in the law firm of Kimball and Stacy, was arrested last night for the first-degree murder of Diana Beauclerk, divorced wife of Daniel Forbes of Wickford, nearby suburb. The ar-

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rest was announced by police shortly after midnight just as a writ of habeas corpus for Martin Stacy was issued to Clement Kimball, probable candidate for the U. S. Senate at next year's election, who is also Stacy's senior partner and legal representative. Mr. Kimball told reporters that Stacy was held incommunicado by police without a warrant for three hours prior to his formal arrest in violation of his constitutional rights.

"Martin is incapable of murder," added Mr. Kimball. "He's been like an adopted son to my wife and myself. We have no children of our own and Martin came to the firm direct from his graduating class at law school five years ago."

Asked why there was a bruise under Stacy's right eye when he appeared in court, a police inspector said: He fell downstairs. Can you see the boys pulling any rough stuff on a guy who's a lawyer?"

Alec could. He had once been a police reporter and he knew that prisoners don't fall downstairs unless they are pushed.

He let his coffee grow cold as he studied the black disk once more. Could it have been dropped by the intruder during the struggle last night? Then why did the intruder roll back the rug prior to the struggle?

Both man and girl had been looking for something on the floor. The disk was the sort of thing you would expect to find on the floor if it were lost—a round, flat object that would drop and roll out of sight like a coin. It had been hidden behind the radiator valve—the one piece of furniture that could not be moved out from the wall during an ordinary search of the room.

The disk could easily have lain there for two weeks, unnoticed by frightened maids cleaning a "haunted" room in a hurry and detectives who were either careless or corrupt. Detectives who fell back on third-degree methods were usually one or the other. But would they have been any wiser if they had found the black disk? What was it used for? What was it called? A clue without name or function was only half a clue! It must be evidence—but evidence of what?

Whistling tunelessly, Alec slipped the nameless clue into his wallet and reached for his hat. In the long, dim corridor he passed a linen closet. A chambermaid was sorting clean towels and sheets.

"Hello! What's your name?"

"Marie, sir."

"Marie what?"

"Marie Chester."

Alec leaned against the door of the linen closet. "I'm in 1105. Are you the maid for that room?"

"Yes." Her eyelids dropped when she heard the room number. She went on sorting linen. Black hair framed her pale face, thin and

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worn as a profile on an old coin. It was a mature, intelligent face with a discontented mouth.

"Do you dust behind the radiator?" Alec went on.

She paused and braced herself, one hand against a shelf. Her brows knotted, her narrow lips hardened. She had a temper. "If you have any complaints, sir—?"

"Oh, no," interposed Alec. "But I found something behind the radiator this morning. I thought it might have been dropped by a maid." He fished the black disk out of his wallet. "Yours?"

There was no gleam of recognition in her eyes. "I don't even know what it is!" She spoke scornfully. "It certainly doesn't look valuable."

"No." He tossed the disk into the air and caught it with one hand. "Was it there the last time you dusted behind the radiator?"

His casual tone caught her off guard. "I haven't dusted behind the radiator since—" She stopped short.

"Since—?" he prompted gently.

"So you're a cop! I might have known!" Naked fear looked out of her eyes. The work-roughened hand on the shelf began to tremble. Even her voice shook. "Two weeks ago I tried to tell the cops my story. Those men wouldn't even listen. If there'd been a woman detective on the case, she'd've listened. But nobody can tell men anything! The reporters listened, but they didn't print a word."

"I suppose there were no women reporters either?" said Alec with a half smile.

"If there were they wrote all their stuff in the office. They never came here. And the men weren't interested in me. If I'd been ten years younger with bleached hair and a come-hither eye— But perhaps it's just as well I'm not."

"Why?"

"Room 1105 has been vacant ever since the cops cleared out. But yesterday morning when I went in there, the furniture was all moved around and the rug rolled back. Do you think I'd stop to dust behind radiators in a place like that? 1105 hasn't had a real dusting since the morning before the murder. The housekeeper won't go in there at all and I wouldn't myself without the bathmaid!"

"Was there a black disk behind the radiator when you dusted there the morning before the murder?"

"No!" She was almost shouting. "Now will you leave me alone?"

Alec studied the mature, intelligent face. "What are you afraid of? Ghosts?"

"Ghosts?" She laughed cheerlessly. "No, mister, I ain't afraid of ghosts! But I'm afraid of *him*."

"Him?"

Her answer came in a whisper. "Leo Benda."

"Who's that?"

"I've said too much already." Her thin lips clamped together. "Lemme alone now!"

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Outdoors, winter sunshine was pale and thin as lemonade. Alec picked his way through drifts of dingy city snow to the offices of the *Pearson City Star*. The newspaper's "morgue" was a long, light, airy room filled with filing cabinets. Three men sat at a table clipping stories from yesterday's paper.

"Syndicated Press," announced Alec. "Got a file on Diana Beauclerk?"

One man thought the case was too recent. But another intervened, "Sure there's a file. I just sent it up to the city room. If you'll wait a while you can have it when it comes back."

After twenty minutes a copy boy trotted in carrying a manila envelope stuffed with newspaper clippings. Alec dumped them out on the table and rearranged them in chronological order.

It was the cuts illustrating the various stories that interested him most. One picture was obviously a snapshot enlarged for newspaper use. It showed a boy and girl arm in arm. She was hatless, short hair blowing in the wind. Her eyes were darker than her hair. There was character in the firm line of her chin, tenderness in the soft curve of her mouth. Alec looked at the caption:

Last man to see Diana Beauclerk alive—Martin Stacy with his sister, Jean, at the opening of the Melbrook County sheep dog trials.

Alec turned to other clippings: *The police are leaving no stone unturned . . . Miss Beauclerk's death is a great loss to the American stage . . .*

One item was not clipped from a newspaper. It was a strip of galley proof.

MYSTERY WOMAN IN BEAUCLERK CASE

Pearson City, Monday, Jan. 8—Marie Chester, chambermaid at the hotel where Diana Beauclerk was murdered, told reporters today that police are making a big mistake in assuming that the murderer is a man.

"A woman killed Miss Beauclerk," insisted Miss Chester. "I was substituting for the night maid on the night of the murder and I saw a woman leave Miss Beauclerk's suite shortly after midnight. She went down the corridor and passed through the door leading to the fire stairs. I told the police but they wouldn't pay any attention to me. I couldn't see the woman's face but she was wearing a long, brown coat."

On the wide margin of the galley proof four words had been rubber-stamped in red ink: *KILLED IN FIRST EDITION.*

Alec showed it to one of the men at the table. "How come?"

The man grinned irreverently. "The big boss himself phoned down to the printer just as we were

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going to press and said to kill the story."

"Why?" persisted Alec.

"The police psychiatrist says Marie Chester is an unreliable witness subject to hallucinations, sex antagonism, and spots before the eyes. Rumor says the yarn was killed because Mr. Leo Benda no likee. You pays your money and you takes your choice!"

"Who is this Leo Benda anyway?"

The man stared. "Hasn't New York ever heard of Leo Benda? They'd call him a *fuehrer* in Europe, but here, in our crude Western way, we call him a racketeer. He owns Pearson City lock, stock, and barrel—everything from slot machines and clip joints to bucket shops and poultry markets."

"And the police department?"

The *Star* man laughed and winked. "I wouldn't know."

Alec's next stop was the District Attorney's office. His press card from the New York police department gained him admittance to the property clerk. Diana Beauclerk's belongings were spread out on a table: one coat, red velveteen with a fox collar; two dresses, day and evening; one hat, also red velveteen; some flimsy rayon underthings and shabby toilet articles.

No wonder she had wanted that lump sum from Forbes! She must have been living through one of those financial crises that come so often to stage people.

The sun had set when Alec reached the sprawling white frame house in the suburbs where Jean Stacy had been living with her brother Martin. A golden afterglow lingered in the west as Alec crossed a windswept terrace and pressed the doorbell. The door was opened by an old Negress in a spotless white apron.

"Please tell Miss Stacy I'd like to speak to her about her brother. It's important. I think I can help him. My name is Norton."

A tremulous smile on the old brown face told Alec that Martin Stacy was loved by his household.

Alec waited in a broad hall furnished like a living-room. Jean Stacy came down the wide stairs alone.

"Did Marty send you?" She peered through the shadows. "Oh!" She had recognized Alec. Her lips grew as firm as her chin. "What is this? Blackmail?"

"No. I'm perfectly respectable." He produced his New York press card.

Her anger turned to scorn. "I thought women did the sob stuff. Or do they just use rubber stamps? 'I found Miss Stacy a clear-eyed, upstanding American girl. I felt for her deeply'—at eight dollars a column."

"Oh, I get more than space rates," returned Alec lightly. "And I'm not here for sob stuff. I really can help you—if you'll let me."

"What's Marty to you?"

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"Nothing."

"Then you're just a reporter looking for a thrill?"

"Say a trouble-shooter."

"What's the trouble in Pearson City?"

"Too many unsolved murders lately. My chief suggested I look into it. So I've been working on the latest—the murder of Diana Beauclerk."

"But—" Jean's lips lost some of their firmness. "The case is solved now. I mean, they think it is. They think Marty did it."

"They'?"

"The police."

"I wonder if they really do?" said Alec. "They seem to be suppressing the testimony of a chambermaid who saw a woman leave Beauclerk's suite the night of the murder. Your brother wasn't arrested until I reached Pearson City. There were plenty of people in the lobby last night when I asked for Beauclerk's suite. I said I was with the Syndicated Press. Someone in the lobby crowd may have reported my interest in the case to the police. They may have decided it was time to provide press and public with a scapegoat. So your brother was arrested."

Her face twitched. "You mean they're just going to—to railroad him?"

"They're going to try."

"Oh, God!" The exclamation was a prayer. "As long as they believed him guilty, all we had to do was to prove him innocent. But if they don't care whether he's guilty or not—what can we do?"

"Appeal to public opinion. If the Syndicated Press publicized evidence of his innocence throughout the country, the police here couldn't railroad him."

"You're right." Her expression changed. "I'm going to trust you!" she cried impulsively. "I have nobody in the world but Marty and Uncle Kim, and Uncle Kim's too old to handle this."

"Uncle Kim?"

"Clement Kimball, Marty's senior partner. We call him uncle and we call his wife Aunt Margaret. Our real parents died when we were in our teens. What do you want me to do?"

"First, answer some questions," he replied briskly. "What were you looking for early this morning when I discovered you in Diana Beauclerk's suite?"

"The papers said there were signs of a struggle when the body was found and the rug was rolled back as if the murderer had searched the floor for something after the murder. Little things do come loose in a stuggle—buttons, hairpins, things like that. I hoped there might be something the police had overlooked—something that would point to the real murderer and clear Marty. I never dreamed the room would be rented to anyone else so soon after the murder. So I bribed the night

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chambermaid to let me use her passkey."

"That was taking a big risk."

Her eyes looked enormous as she went on, speaking rapidly.

"I was frantic. The police took Marty away yesterday evening at nine o'clock. They wouldn't let me or Uncle Kim see him all night long. We knew they must be giving him a third degree—they had no warrant for his arrest. I just couldn't sit still and think about it. I had to *do* something. But, of course, it was silly to do what I did. The police don't overlook things."

"They did this time." Alec brought out the black disk.

She was puzzled. She turned it over with one long, polished nail as it lay on the palm of his hand. "What is it?"

"I don't know. I was hoping you could tell me. I found it on the floor in Beauclerk's suite behind the radiator. The chambermaid said it wasn't there before the murder. Someone else besides you tried to search the suite last night—a man who looked like a crook. He paid particular attention to the floor. I couldn't question him because he was a mute. He outwitted me and got away, but—he may have been looking for this."

"Then we've got to find out what it is! But how?"

"We can begin by finding out what it's made of. Do you know any industrial chemists?"

"There's one on Water Street." Jean sprang to her feet, eyes shining. "I'll drive you back to town. Just wait till I get my coat."

It was an exhilarating drive in a little two-seater open to the burning chill of the January evening. Jean didn't seem to feel the cold in her fleecy tweed coat. Her light-brown head was bare to the wind. Her shapely hands were ungloved as they rested on the wheel. A nice girl, thought Alec, and not too rich—

The chemist received them in a musty little anteroom. He seemed more anxious to get home to his dinner than to collect a fee for analysis. He took the black disk to a strong light and studied it under a magnifying glass. "Good Lord! You don't want me to analyze this, do you?"

"Why not?"

"It's nothing but cardboard!"

"Are you sure?" cried Alec. "It looks harder and smoother than cardboard."

"Ordinary pasteboard is soft, pulpy stuff," returned the chemist. "But there are better grades of cardboard almost as hard as vulcanite. This is one of them. Any paper manufacturer can tell you which. I don't know the commercial name for it."

"And the black color?" persisted Alec.

"Some dye, probably tar."

Jean intervened. "Can you tell us

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what purpose this disk is used for?"

The chemist looked at her and thawed a little. "I'm sorry, but I can't. It looks as if it were a small part of some larger object. By itself, it's hard to identify. If you saw the inside of a golf ball without the rest of the ball you wouldn't be likely to recognize it. People always identify a part by its relation to the whole."

"Then this disk may be part of something we see every day of our lives?"

"Quite possibly."

Alec and Jean went outside. They had left the street in twilight; they returned to find it night. Jean slid under the steering wheel. Alec stood on the sidewalk.

She said, "What now?"

"I'd like to meet the other people involved in this case—your brother and his lawyer, and Diana Beauclerk's divorced husband, Daniel Forbes. Could it be managed?"

"Of course. Uncle Kim will do everything he can to help us. Meet him at his office tomorrow morning at ten."

"Okay." Alec smiled down at her. "Don't give up hope until we see how Forbes reacts to the black disk."

She returned the smile with steady lips. "Don't worry about me. I'm no quitter. Can I drop you anywhere?"

Alec's eyes were on the rear-view mirror. He saw a man standing just behind him. The face was in shadow, but there was something unpleasantly familiar about the short, heavy body wrapped in an overcoat too broad across the shoulders and too narrow at the waist. Alec's one idea was to get Jean out of the way.

"No, thanks," he said. "I want to explore the city on foot."

"All right." Her car moved forward. The light from a street lamp turned her light-brown hair to bronze and touched the chromium fixtures of the car with the shine of silver. Then darkness swallowed both.

Alec started to turn around. Something hard and round prodded his back just over the kidneys. A heavy hand pushed him toward a car parked at the curb. It was all done quietly, neatly, professionally.

Alec had read about things like this. Nothing of the sort had ever happened to him before. He looked at the street bright with lights, mobile with men and women who hurried about their business unaware of his plight. He wondered if he would ever see all this again. His knees felt limp as rubber bands. He could hardly walk.

The car was a sleek, black limousine with dark silk shades pulled down over each window. The man with the gun followed Alec inside and pulled the door shut. A lighted globe in the roof shone on blue broadcloth upholstery and panels

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of blond walnut, beautifully figured and highly polished. The metal fittings looked like gold. It wasn't like a car. It was like a commodious little parlor.

The car did not move. The man with the gun shoved Alec into one of the little seats and sat himself in the other. He was the man with the Tartar face and the mutilated palate.

Facing them both, on the back seat, was a man with a puffy, pasty face; white hair, brows, and lashes. His dull, round black eyes were like two raisins set in floury white dough. He was dressed with the gaudy, spurious elegance of the successful crook—pearl-gray fedora, velvet-collared overcoat, black-pearl stickpin in a gray satin tie, gray suede gloves with black stitching.

But when he spoke in fluent, academic English with hardly a trace of foreign accent, Alec realized that this was no ordinary slum-bred racketeer. This was the most dangerous type of criminal—the educated man without a conscience.

"What is your interest in the Beauclerk case?" the man inquired softly.

"Nothing personal." Alec was a little surprised at the firmness of his own voice. "I'm a feature writer for the Syndicated Press doing a modern crime series and it's one of the crimes."

"Is that the only reason you insisted on occupying suite 1105 at the Hotel Westmore last night?"

"The only reason."

Before Alec could go on, a voice came from outside. "Wha'd'ye think this is? A parking lot? Ye've been here thirty-five minutes if ye've been here a second! Doncha know nobody can park on Water Street longer'n twenty minutes?"

The man on the back seat raised the shade beside him and lowered the window. A policeman stood just outside.

"Were you speaking to me?" said the man on the back seat.

"Oh—"

Alec had never seen a blustering cop so swiftly deflated. He seemed to shrink to half his normal size. "I sure am very sorry, Mr. Benda."

"You should have recognized my license plates."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Benda. I'm sorry." The cop saluted and retreated, yelling at a truck driver.

"So you are Leo Benda!" murmured Alec.

(*continued on page 64*)

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We published Rick Rubin's first story, "A Gift for Antonietta," in EQMM's March 1960 issue. You will recall that Mr. Rubin's pre-literary background included working ski resorts out West and, for a time, ski instructorship. Well, here is a story about skiing, and obviously it was written by a man who knows *skiing. What a difference first-hand knowledge means to the writer—and to the reader! In "The Strutter of Meckenel" there is an authentic feel of being outdoors on skis—the smack, the rush, the exhilaration of real-life skiing; and for even more thrills and excitement, add such primary human emotions as hate and a consuming passion for revenge . . .*

THE STRUTTER OF MECKENEL

by RICK RUBIN

Ansel Cofleck had come to Eagle Valley only for a vacation, and not to look for them. In fact, it had been years since he had consciously looked for them at all—years since he walked the streets, tall and gaunt, his intense black eyes searching each passing face, praying that he would see this one or that one, rehearsing in his mind the things they had done and the revenge he would take.

But to hate so continuously, so profoundly, you must keep remembering the cause of your hate, and to remember the horrors of the concentration camp at Meckenel had finally become too much for him. Cofleck had not thought of the camp guards in some years.

So he was now standing, without thought of such things, on the stamped-down snow of the ski-school meeting place, among the frosty-breathed crowd of guests and the instructors waiting patiently by their signs, when he found himself staring at a sign printed *Sigi,* and beside it, Sigi Beshtok, whom they had called "The Strutter" at Meckenel. Sigi Beshtok, looking no less the proud little pouter pigeon, his chest outthrust, smug contentment on his deeply tanned face, wearing a bright parka and sharp-creased stretch pants and holding his skis and poles negligently in one hand.

The old memories came back to Cofleck in a rush, like a shock of electricity at first, then searing into the places where the pain had been those many years ago. Of all the ones to discover, he thought, to find finally the most hated of all! The man who had not only been his own special tormenter, but in addition the most eager of all the guards to beat, whip, and torture.

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The man who had taken three full days to drive poor Karl Gerlach out of his mind. The man who had not been content with causing pain but who had told them constantly of the sin of being deviationists against The Super State. Who had told them what scum they were, how less than pure, how undeserving of the slop they ate and the rough boards they slept on.

The man who had lectured them along with his tortures. "I'm a scientist," his favorite theme had been. "I'm seeing what's wrong with you scum. Every one of you is sick. Bad blood. Bad race. Bad politics. Not a healthy human among you. So I make little experiments to see how close to human you are. Cut a little here, twist a little there, pry off this, dig into that—to see if you can take what a real man can take.

"I doubt that you can take it," he always concluded his lectures. "I don't think any of you will survive my little experiments."

And then came the never-ending kicking and whipping and beating —feeling one's finger nails torn from the living flesh, hearing one's friends scream and scream, and finally die in agony, blessing their killer for a saint because he had terminated their misery at long last.

. . .

Ansel Cofleck felt the colossal hate grow within him again, cold and hard and demanding. And feeling it, he smoothed his face into a mask, concealing his emotions as he had once learned to from necessity in the concentration camp. He willed his mouth into a happy grin. And, indeed, wasn't there cause for happiness now?

For Sigi Beshtok, "The Strutter" of Meckenel, was going to receive his long delayed reward for scientific achievement.

Cofleck didn't know how long the ski-school director had been standing in front of him, but he could tell that the question was being repeated. "I must know how well you ski, sir," the director said. "In which class shall I put you?"

"Oh . . . ah, intermediate, I think," Cofleck said. He pulled himself back from Meckenel to this Colorado valley with the ski-trailed mountain looming above it and the innocent blue sky. "I have skied since boyhood, but I have a physical defect and am no longer proficient."

The director gestured him to one of the instructors, a man under a sign printed *Jim* several places beyond Sigi. Cofleck shouldered his skis and walked to his class, feeling self-conscious of his stiff, graceless walk. It was many years since he had been conscious of how people might notice him, but now he did not want anything to call Sigi Beshtok's attention to him. He needed time to think out just how he would get his long-awaited revenge.

But how could "The Strutter" recognize him? It was almost fif-

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teen years since that day when he had been lying on his plank bed and had looked up into a soldier's face and slowly realized that he had been liberated. Fifteen years since the soldiers had come, and the prisoners had died like flies with gratitude for the freedom they could no longer enjoy, while the guards fled, blending back into the population.

And besides, why would Beshtok remember him in particular? To Cofleck, Beshtok was forever the man who had shaped the rest of his life with a single act; but to Beshtok, Cofleck had been just another prisoner.

The hate was white-hot now, and easy to keep aflame. It burned by itself, needing no feeding or tending, and Cofleck pondered how he might best revenge himself. He thought of it all that day on the ski slopes. Occasionally Beshtok's faster class would pass his own and he would steel his face to show no sign of recognition or animosity; but he could not keep himself from staring at the man.

Beshtok seemed as arrogant as he had been the long years before, shouting instructions to his students as if they were military commands. Even on skis he strutted, just as he had in his forest-green guard's uniform.

It was Cofleck's first day on skis that year and he devoted himself to relearning the old skills. He skied with some ability, but as with his walking he looked as though he had to think out each separate movement. He lacked the naturalness and grace of the young athelete and had only precision and a certain stiff jerkiness. But to Cofleck the fact that he could ski at all was a constant delight. That he could walk, taste food, smell grass and flowers, see dawn and sunset and beautiful women—that he was even alive was a constant surprise and joy to him.

Not merely alive, but healthy and prosperous. Who would have thought, fifteen years before at Meckenel, that Ansel Cofleck would one day reach America, become the owner of a prosperous business, have friends and neighbors who smiled and said good day to him, be on a vacation in Eagle Valley, to ski and enjoy himself. It was a wonder of medical science, of America, and of life—and Cofleck thought of it even as he thought of how he would revenge himself on Beshtok.

The day's skiing over, Cofleck ate dinner at the hotel, then walked in the town looking for Beshtok. He found the instructor at one of the bars with a woman student. He was telling her tales of his skiing feats. Cofleck sat nearby and listened as Beshtok told of the old country and how much better the skiing was there. He bragged of his racing reputation, of the higher and steeper mountains, of the more cultured people.

Cofleck listened, and deep inside

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a quiet pleasure grew alongside the fire of his hate—a pleasure at what he was going to do to this strutting little man. And whatever he finally did, Cofleck promised himself that it would put an end forever to Beshtok's evenings of bragging and posing before women guests.

Once, on his way back from the men's room, he came face to face with Beshtok. For a moment he felt panic. He will recognize me, he thought. The marks are still there—the lined face, the haunted eyes, the hate and fear. How can a man who once did what this man did to him fail to recognize him?

But Beshtok swaggered past and barely looked at Cofleck. No, Cofleck thought, he will not recognize me. But I must make it plain to him who it is that does whatever I do. Revenge without the victim's full knowledge of it would be of no value. Even if Cofleck killed him quickly, he must make Beshtok aware of the reason—must remind him what he did to us, and how we suffered.

Cofleck did not stay late. He felt tired by his seething emotions and saw no need to follow Beshtok further. The need now was for exactly the proper thing to do. He went to his hotel and lay on the bed. I represent thousands of people, he thought. I must do just the right thing. We are both symbols now, not mere individuals. He was the oppressor, and I was the oppressed, and I must make a vengeance that will symbolize the feelings of all the other impure and unacceptable people who died or were maimed in body and mind by the strutting heroes of The Super State. I have a great duty and I must not fail in it, he thought.

He awoke to the sun streaming through his window. Outside it was still and cold. At breakfast he heard that there was a cold snap—20° below zero. Winds from the plains of Canada, they said.

At the ski-school meeting place the air bit Cofleck's nose and ears. Bright speckles of frost filtered down from blue sky to stick to his parka, and the students and instructors stomped about and flailed their arms to keep warm.

He glanced cautiously at Sigi's sign. He was not there! Could he have guessed Cofleck's identity and fled?

He had to know, even at the risk of exposing himself. He made his way to the ski-school director. "I was thinking of switching to Sigi's class," he said. "I noticed them go by several times yesterday, and they seemed more my level. But I don't see him here today. Will he not be leading his class?"

"Sigi has taken a student touring on The Backbone," the director said. "He will be back tomorrow. Perhaps you can join him then."

"Ah . . . The Backbone?"

"The range behind Eagle Mountain. It is fine, unspoiled touring country. Perhaps you would like to

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tour on The Backbone yourself?"

"Perhaps. Yes, perhaps. I will think about it."

He returned to his class and accompanied it to the ski slopes. His mind seemed to cling to The Backbone. Suddenly it occurred to him how he might take his revenge—and even do so without fear of punishment; for unless others saw what he did, Beshtok would never dare tell and thus expose his own past.

During a rest break he asked his instructor about The Backbone. "What sort of place is it?" he said.

"Quite rugged," the instructor said. "Forest on the lower slopes, bare above. There is a road that goes around behind Eagle Mountain, and from there you climb."

"Forest, eh? And streams and lakes, I suppose?"

"Yes. Most of the streams are frozen over now, but some are too fast to freeze. You have to watch out for them. The forest isn't thick. Perfect for slalom among the trees. Some wonderful country there for deep-powder skiing, particularly when it's as cold as this."

Then he was sure of his plan and could hardly wait for the day to be over. The instructor spoke further of The Backbone, but Cofleck barely listened. The instructor took an interest in Cofleck's skiing. He suggested that it would improve markedly if he tried to bend his ankles and knees more. Cofleck smiled and said that he would do his best. Yes, he thought, I will try to bend my knees and ankles, but only my knees will obey. My ankles will prove recalcitrant. But I do not feel angry at them. I feel a quiet affection today for my stiff and unbending ankles.

At noon he ate his lunch with the other students and even talked and joked with them. Then he excused himself from the afternoon class and skied by himself. He practiced in the unpacked snow off the trails, and as he felt his ability return he became more and more sure of himself.

After classes were over for the day he found the head of the ski school. "I've decided that I would like to go to The Backbone tomorrow, if Sigi is free," he said.

"Excellent," the driector said. "I'll get in touch with him at his home. But a private lesson is quite expensive, you know."

"The money is not important."

"Fine. You can meet Sigi tomorrow morning at the ski-school meeting place. He will bring lunch for both of you."

So it was arranged.

Cofleck ate his dinner alone and went directly to his room. He read for a while, and then tried to sleep, but all night long images of the past haunted him. He remembered the smells and sounds and feelings of Meckenel with a clarity that was almost frightening. He remembered the other prisoners—Horst, who had slowly starved to death;

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Moishe, who had tried to escape and was caught and tortured in the camp square while the other prisoners were forced to look on; Wladislaus, who broke down and begged for mercy and was given only more pain and suffering . . . Cofleck thought of his home before the concentration camp, of his parents and friends. Nothing had remained when he returned after the liberation. He had not even discovered when and where his family had died.

He worried too about his plan. In the dark of the night it seemed so risky. More than anything else it depended on finding the proper place, and on the weather. He lay in his bed and thought of all these things, and listened to his clock tick interminably, maddeningly . . .

Yet when the alarm woke him in the morning he felt strong and rested. He dressed rapidly, putting on his warmest clothes. Outside it was clear again, and colder than the day before. The wind from Canada was holding, and he whispered his thanks to it.

He went to the meeting place and the director introduced him to Beshtok. For a moment Beshtok stared at him and Cofleck shuddered inside, fearing that he was recognized. But Beshtok gave no sign of recognition. Cofleck realized with a shock that he still felt not only hate but also fear. If Beshtok had ordered him to clean his boots, then and there he would have started to do so. The man had held the power of life or death over Cofleck for so long that even now the fear remained.

They piled their gear into a station wagon and drove out of Eagle Valley and onto the road that led to The Backbone.

"You seem to have an accent, Mr. Cofleck," Beshtok said. "Can it be that you also are from Europe?"

"Yes, I was born there, but came to this country as a young man. I haven't been able to lose the accent however."

"Ah, but why would you want to? I feel that an accent is a mark of dignity. Unless, of course, you have unpleasant memories?"

He realized that Beshtok was suspicious. But of course!—a man with such a past would always be suspicious. Why didn't I think of that before, Cofleck wondered. Beshtok would look into each new face, wondering under what circumstances they might have met before. In Beshtok too there must be fear—a deep and undying fear.

"It was a long time ago," Cofleck said. "I hardly remember Europe. Now I only want to be a good American, and for that an accent is not a help."

He felt a wild urge to tell Beshtok who he was, but he fought it down. Not yet, he thought. There will be time enough. Knowing now, Beshtok might deal with me before I deal with him.

They left the car at the end of

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the road. Above them were the serrated peaks of The Backbone. They put on their skis and Beshtok slung a rucksack over his shoulders and they set off, climbing slowly, in long traverses, toward the timberline.

Now I must look for the right place, Cofleck thought. He climbed behind Beshtok, digging in with his poles at every step, and his eyes roved over the snow, searching for the marks of the place he was looking for. There will probably be a dip in the snow, he thought, and perhaps a few trees growing around. Certainly if I am close enough I will be able to hear it.

It was still as cold, but the climb made them warm and they stripped off their parkas and tied them around their waists. After an hour Beshtok called a rest break. They stood across the trail from each other, breathing deeply and leaning on their poles. Around them the trees had begun to thin out and they could clearly see the peaks above them.

"Why did you choose me to lead you here to The Backbone?" Beshtok suddenly demanded.

"I heard that you led another student over here yesterday," Cofleck said. "I decided that I'd like to come, and I didn't know if any of the other instructors led such trips."

"Several of them could have taken you."

"I didn't know that."

"Have we ever met before, Mr. Cofleck?"

"Where would that have been? I don't even know where you are from, Sigi."

"Ah, yes, so you don't. But you can tell from my accent, can't you?"

"No, I'm not good at interpreting accents. Where is it that you come from, Sigi?"

"It doesn't matter. Never mind. I was just thinking that I might have seen you before."

They climbed again, and after another hour they were well above the timberline. The mountain opened into broad slopes, giant flanks of ridges, and deep valleys. They skied along on the level for a while and then dipped into one of the wide canyons. The snow was deep and untouched and they turned smoothly through it, their ski tips planing up out of the snow, great plumes of powder flying out behind them. The sharp wind bit their cheeks, and their hands were painful with cold where they gripped their poles.

At the bottom they stopped for lunch. There was a little lake, ice-covered and surrounded by stunted trees. At the upper end of the lake they could see the bed of a stream. The canyon was blocked, and all around, snow-covered slopes rose above them.

Beshtok had watched him ski down the last stretch of the slope. "You do not bend your knees and ankles enough," he said. "Your skiing will improve if you bend more."

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"Yes," Cofleck said, "I will try to do that. Thank you." He almost laughed; it seemed such a great joke to hear Beshtok tell him to bend his ankles. How long a time is fifteen years, Cofleck thought.

They took off their skis and sat on them to eat their lunch. After a few minutes Cofleck got up and walked toward the stream. "I want a drink of water," he said.

"Be careful," Beshtok said. "The ice may be treacherous."

Cofleck stood by the stream and searched the ice with his eyes. There was a spot that he thought might do, and he stood on it and felt the ice begin to buckle under him. He wondered vaguely how deep the water would be. Looking back, he saw that Beshtok was facing the other way, eating a sandwich.

Cofleck bounced his weight on the ice and it cracked beneath him, sending him crashing into the water. He struggled to keep his balance as the water rushed around his legs, foaming up halfway to his knees. "Help! Help!" he shouted. "Sigi, help me!"

The instructor came on the run. "You fool!" he said. "I told you to beware of the ice. Now you've fallen in and if we don't act fast you'll freeze to death."

"Help me out," Cofleck said.

"I've got to be careful," Beshtok said, "or I'll fall in too." He edged his way to the bank and stretched out a hand. "It's too far," he said. "I'll have to go get a ski."

"No, you can make it. Just a little nearer."

Beshtok stepped out gingerly on the ice and stretched his arm to Cofleck. Finally their hands met. Cofleck waited until he had a firm grip, then levered himself up. He seemed to be almost out, but Beshtok began to lose his balance.

"Let go, damn you," Beshtok shouted. "You're pulling me in!"

But he had shouted too late, and now they stood side by side in the water. "We'll freeze!" the instructor screamed. They pushed against each other and the water rushed cold against their legs.

Finally they managed to get back on the snow. "We must build a fire immediately," Beshtok said. "Our feet will freeze in a matter of minutes in this cold."

They gathered twigs and branches from the thin trees and bushes standing near the stream and piled them together. Beshtok was almost in a state of panic, his motions jerky and uncontrolled. "I have no matches," Cofleck said. "Give me yours and I'll light the fire."

Beshtok tried to light his matches himself, but his hands shook too much, and he passed them to Cofleck. "You don't realize the danger of our situation," he said. "Without the fire we will never be able to walk or ski back to the car. Our feet will freeze and we will die here."

Cofleck tore off a match and ignited it against the sandpaper of

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the folder. He held the match for a second, and suddenly the whole book of matches burst into flame. He dropped the matches and they fell into the snow and sputtered out.

Beshtok began to scream again. "You fool! You damn fool!" he shouted. He ran to his skis and began to put them on. It was obvious that he no longer had complete control of his feet or legs.

Cofleck walked after him and began to put on his own skis. "Have you no more matches?" he asked. "We could try another fire."

"None. I have none. You have killed us with your stupidity. And don't think that I will wait for you! If I can make it I'll leave you in a minute."

Beshtok had removed his gloves in order to put on his skis faster. Cofleck pushed the gloves into the snow and covered them. When Beshtok was done with the skis he looked for the gloves, but in his anxiety to get started he soon gave up. He began to climb out of the little valley and Cofleck followed him. Beshtok could no longer handle his skis. He fell almost every other step. He was crawling on his hands and knees by the time he reached the top. Tears streamed down his cheeks, turning to ice on his chin.

"Don't worry, Beshtok," Cofleck said, "I'll carry you back. You won't die." He removed Sigi's skis and began to tie them together to form a toboggan.

"But you? How will you be able to walk and ski?"

Cofleck rolled Sigi on top of the makeshift toboggan, placing him so that the bindings cut into his back. He tied him on, roping his bare hands outside where they would be unprotected from the cold. Beshtok's fingers already showed specks of white.

"But why are you not freezing?" Beshtok shouted.

Cofleck looked down into the instructor's panic-stricken face. "My feet are not freezing because I have no feet, Beshtok. Because fifteen years ago at Meckenel you smashed my feet and ankles with a club, and then permitted gangrene to set in. Because from just below the knees my legs are metal and plastic—from where you amputated them without benefit of anesthetic.

"If you like, you can tell them when we get back what I have done to you. Tell them how I have given you a chance to enjoy mechanical legs like mine, and perhaps even mechanical hands. Then we will both go to jail, Beshtok—but I think you will go for longer than I."

The instructor was screaming with hate and agony, but there was no one to hear. Cofleck put the rope over his shoulder and began to pull the toboggan. He moved slowly—like a man who is in no great hurry.

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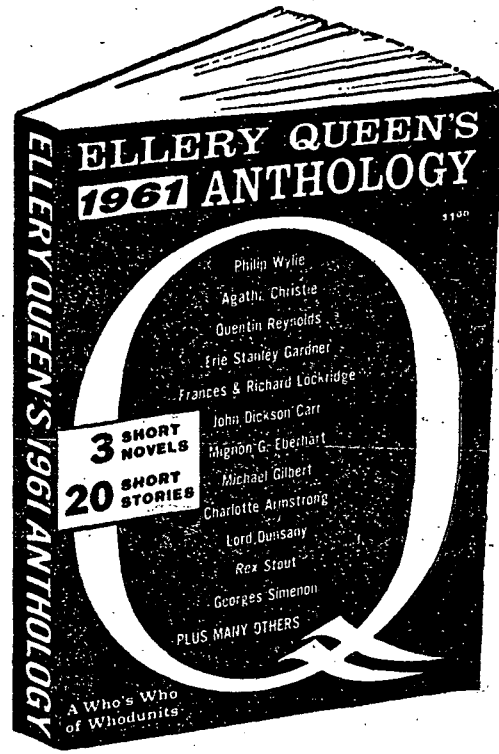

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The author is a philosophy graduate of the University of Minnesota. Steeped in the mysteries of Spinoza, Hegel, and Kant, he nevertheless prefers the mysteries (and we are now quoting) of Christie, Carr, and Queen. His family had a large library when he was a boy, so young Mr. Pelletier learned to read early. He now believes that the family library "contained the seeds" of his future.

He enlisted in the Air Force in March 1951, and after some strange adventures in the Wilds of Aptitude Tests found himself assigned to the Security Service in Japan—specifically, to an intelligence squadron in Tokyo. He was made "historian for the USAFSS in the Far East" . . . When Mr. Pelletier sends us more of his work (and we urge him to do so!), we will tell you his interesting impressions of contemporary Japan . . .

THE HEDGEHOG AND THE FOX

by BRUCE D. PELLETIER

"PROFESSOR BALFOUR," SAID INSPECTOR Ishikawa of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police, "I am a hedgehog. I know one big thing—crime and criminals. You are a fox. You know many little things—and through these maybe one bigger thing, but I will not quarrel with Aeschylus.

"I have asked you to my office this afternoon," the Inspector went on, "to see if perhaps the fox can tell the hedgehog how it is that an old man can be stabbed in full view of six people without even one of them knowing he was dead?"

John Balfour is a professor of Moral Philosophy. As a casual friend, the Inspector knew little of

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him. But what he knew, he liked. He knew, for example, that Professor Balfour had the same compulsions toward problems that some people had toward chasing fire engines; that he was a constant letter writer, bombarding the *Mainichi* at the drop of a collective principle; and that he had a rail-splitter intellect—lean, hard, and angular.

The Inspector opened a book on his desk and read: "'Born in 19th century Asia, educated by Jesuits in Saigon and Paris, Henri Caton's statesmanship bears the stamp of scholarship and Christian love. Twice his hands wove the brittle threads of factional politics into a national fabric in Southeast Asia.'"

Ishikawa closed the book.

"At a time close to nine o'clock this morning, during a conference held in a third floor Maranouchi Hotel suite, this man Henri Caton was murdered."

"I know," Balfour said. "There was a news bulletin. But precisely how did he die? The radio account was vague."

Tugging at his coat, the Inspector extracted a clean cloth which, when unwrapped, exposed a polished metal blade. It was four inches long, about a quarter-inch at one end and tapered to a deadly point at the other. The edges were finely honed.

Winking back the sunlight, so alive with reflections of color, the blade was somehow too gay to be labeled an instrument of death.

"They took it out of his heart and chest," Ishikawa said. "It is not much of a blade, but the doctor said it caused almost immediate death. There was practically no blood."

"How was it administered?" Balfour asked with distaste.

"How indeed? But let me start at the beginning."

Ishikawa unfolded a sheet of paper containing a diagram and pushed it toward the philosopher.

"First, let me say something about the conference room. It is in a corner suite facing the Imperial Palace grounds on the west and an office building occupied by the American Far Eastern Air Force Command on the north. The windows will not open—it is a Western style hotel with air-conditioning. There is a door to the suite that opens into a blind corridor. This door was locked during the meeting, and—more important—it was in the field of vision of one man all the time.

"Here," he said, indicating five blocks on the drawing arranged in a rough semicircle, "I have tried to reproduce accurately the angles as from the murdered man's position." He added, with a shake of his head, "I have a feeling that angles may be important.

"Caton was sitting here," he continued, jabbing his finger at the middle block. "Chang Hua Cheng, the young Chinese, was on his immediate left, Tanabashi Ushiro was

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on his immediate right. There were two other men, each at one end of the semicircle. Anthony Dresser, the English diplomat, was standing directly before the victim about fifteen feet away and facing the whole group. Paul Caton was sitting at a table a little behind and to the left of his father."

"Now if I understand you correctly, Inspector," Balfour interposed, "you are commenting on the relative possibility of someone from the outside killing Caton. Third floor, locked room—not very likely!"

"Not very, but no less unlikely than the other alternative." Inspector Ishikawa fluttered the pages of his notebook. "At eight forty-five all six people arrived."

"Wasn't Paul Caton with his father?"

"No, he was not. The reason is to be found in Kamakura, I think. Paul Caton is no stranger to the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Force. He spent much time—too much time—in the Shinjuku among the more radical elements of our population. We have seen him at several minor demonstrations."

"Apparently his politics were not those of his father."

"Bad company, undoubtedly," the Inspector said. "Also, the police at Kamakura mentioned something about a beachhouse and a girl from the British embassy. From all accounts they lived a rather full social life.

"Just before the meeting convened—or about eight fifty-five—the son, Paul, had a loud discussion with his father concerning this girl, much to the embarrassment of the old man."

"His future relationship with the girl?" Balfour knew Henri Caton would have a special interest in a potential daughter-in-law.

"I should say it concerned a more immediate relationship," the Inspector said with great delicacy. "He wished to leave the meeting to catch an early train to Yokohama."

"And from there to Kamakura, I suppose?"

"Yes. But his father insisted that he needed him to take notes. According to Mr. Dresser, Caton then took his son to the far end of the room, where they engaged in an animated talk. He said the son made 'a typically Gallic gesture'—which I must admit means nothing to me—walked to the table, and sat down."

"Did Henri Caton speak to anyone else before the meeting?"

"Two people. Before he could return to the main group, Tanabashi Ushiro stopped him. He also had a conversation with the old man—this the son overheard. Mr. Caton was of the opinion that too many strings were attached to a sizable personal loan made in Indonesia. He rather untactfully proposed that these strings should be removed."

Tanabashi had been resurrected

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from Japan's economic ashes. A minor capitalist in the wartime *zaibatsu* system, he was watched very closely by the Occupation Government. But his efforts since the war were directed toward the vineyards in which Henri Caton labored—Southeast Asia.

The professor asked, "Was Tanabashi at the meeting alone?"

"Yes. The old Caton forbade the presence of Tanabashi's advisor and—how do you call him?"

"Henchman, hatchet-man, bodyguard."

"Hatchet-man?" The Inspector's eyes widened. "Is this a good word?"

"Well, it's a perfectly valid American word. Perhaps even typically American."

Ishikawa snorted. "In any case, Tanabashi's 'hatchet-man' was not allowed to be present. He waited downstairs."

Balfour nodded.

"Chang Hua Cheng was the last man to talk to Caton before he sat down. And," the Inspector added with special emphasis, "the last man to be near Caton when the old man was alive."

Balfour grunted. "Youth again, but this time the Kuomintang young. I understand Chang speaks for those young people in Taipei weighed by both the frustrations of geographic confinement and of being ignored—those who are bent on conquering the mainland with no weapons but cries of 'Unification' and 'Liberty.' Hardly a match for MIG-Seventeens and the Red Army."

"There has apparently been a trend toward a merger of mature leadership and the energies of youth," Ishikawa said.

"Reducing Mr. Chang's following even more, I suspect."

"I don't know. But—again according to Mr. Dresser, an acute observer of political straws in the wind—Chang must have conveyed good news to Caton. Just before the meeting was to begin, Chang whispered his message in the old man's ear. The English diplomat, Dresser, saw Caton manage a wan smile—have you ever noticed how uncomfortable we old reactionaries are in close proximity to young radicals?—then turn and sit down. Dresser watched closely because it was rumored that Chang had come to Tokyo expressly to deliver a message to the old man; and things being what they are in Asia, he was anxious to observe Caton's reaction."

"Then what happened?"

"Then the old man sat down. Everybody saw him sit down—after all, he was the focal point of the meeting. So it is important to point out the fact that at this moment Henri Caton was still alive. This I will swear. Even Mr. Dresser said in his statement—Let's see. Where is it? Yes. He said: 'All of us who were fond of the old man must have thought, as I did when I

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saw him sink into his chair weighed down by his eighty years: I wonder how much longer we will have him in Asia?' "

Balfour said bitterly, "And five minutes later Dresser had his answer."

Ishikawa continued, "Then everyone else sat down. Dresser took this to mean that he could begin his address. He spoke for about five minutes—mostly reading from notes—looked up, and noticed that Caton was sleeping. He even made a joke about a sleeping tiger. Paul Caton came around in front of his father and tried to wake him. He saw a spot of blood on the old man's shirt, found the wound . . . I'm afraid the son took it very badly. After a moment of confusion, Mr. Dresser telephoned us. We arrived ten minutes later—ten minutes in which everybody stared at everybody else. We searched the people and the room."

"And?"

The Inspector sat back in his chair and looked at the philosopher squarely. "There was no weapon of any kind in that room other than the blade we took out of the old man."

Balfour extracted his pipe and pouch, showering tobacco on his jacket and trousers. He packed the pipe, lit it, and sucked on it noisily. He momentarily regretted the abandonment of the reason for his Japanese sabbatical, a series of volumes privately referred to as "The Ideological History of the Whole Damn World."

"Are you certain?" he said.

"Positive. We very nearly atomized the room and its occupants. Starting with the table, there was a lamp, a pad of paper, a vase full of various writing instruments, a telephone, seven chairs, a sofa, a *tokonoma* containing a wooden bowl, a single chrysanthemum, and a painting of flying cranes. Anthony Dresser had with him—"

"Inspector, I accept your word. I should have known better than to ask. Let's consider that blade."

Ishikawa promptly said, "I cannot see how it could have been used manually. Handling it is difficult. It could have been fired from something like a spring gun, but this theory has several glaring drawbacks. First, the brightness of the day. If the blade was fired by someone in the room it would have to pass directly in the line of another person's vision. Even assuming that the blade would have an unreasonably high velocity, you saw how highly polished it is and how it consequently would reflect the sunlight. Second, we can assume that Caton was alive when he sat down—he could not have walked around the room with that blade in his chest even had he been so inclined. The angle of the blade also indicates he was sitting down when he died. It entered directly from the front and on a plane roughly parallel to the floor—the wound is at a

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slight upward angle since the backs of the chairs recline slightly. There was only one man in a position to fire it from this particular angle—Anthony Dresser, the one man being watched by everyone."

Balfour nodded. "It is difficult to believe that a man can draw a device, fire it, kill a man from fifteen feet, and not skip a word of his speech."

"Now," Ishikawa said, "there are two people I have not yet mentioned because . . . well, primarily because they were at no time near Caton and they sat in chairs more than arm's length away from the victim. Each might have reached Caton had he risen from his chair and leaned across the man between Caton and himself. You will admit that is not very likely!"

And, thought Balfour, because they are probably Americans whose embassy at this particular time might be less than objective in evaluating all but the most positive evidence.

"Of the two who sat next to the old man—Tanabashi and Chang—I can only say that they would have had to move slightly toward Caton, draw the weapon, extend their arms, and plunge the blade into the dead man's heart. But these two, as well as the other two, were in the most unenviable position in which to commit a murder—directly in view of the victim's watching son and the victim's speaking friend. Neither of whom reports a significant movement of any kind."

Balfour said, "You must admit the field is narrowing."

"Oh, yes. It leaves us with the one man who sat *behind* the victim throughout the meeting, Paul Caton."

"Not the entire meeting, Inspector. He was in front of his father when he tried to wake him. Couldn't be have knifed the old man then?"

"The others say no, emphatically." Inspector Ishikawa displayed great self-control when he went on. "Which emphasizes our impossible crime. There is no doubt Henri Caton was killed. But how did the blade get into his heart?"

Balfour walked to the window, puffing on a pipe that had gone out. A late afternoon haze was settling on the city. Pulsing movement of hot sticky air carried a hint of the muddy canals that led to the Sumida River nearby.

Suddenly he spun around. "Did Paul Caton actually take any notes?"

Inspector Ishikawa handed him a piece of paper. On it, in a restless hand, was written: "Anthony Dresser—(nothing new)."

Balfour said, "I should like to see that room."

En route to the Maranouchi Hotel the professor settled back in the Toyopet's stiff cushions, impervious to the screaming horns and the hairbreadth escapes of pedestrians.

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He spoke just once. "You know, I once heard of a professor who was always late for his first class. When a colleague asked him why he slept later than the rest of them, he replied that he did not sleep longer than they did, he merely slept more slowly."

Ishikawa assumed an expression he fervently hoped was inscrutable.

When Balfour had seen the hotel room he knew that, with allowances made for torn cushions, the rolled carpet, and other indications of the zeal of Ishikawa's men, the room was exactly as the Inspector had described it.

"Are the four men available?"

"They are in the lobby. The press is to interview them in fifteen minutes."

"I shouldn't allow that if I were you," Balfour said.

The Inspector asked sharply, "Do you know something?"

"I know the eleventh chapter of the *Tai Te Ching*."

"The *Tao Te Ching*? Forgive me, Professor, but I fail to see the applicability of ancient Chinese mysticism to this crime."

"It applies, all right." Balfour said, and he quoted:

"Thirty spokes will converge
In the hub of a wheel;
But the use of the wheel
Will depend on the part
Of the hub that is void.

With a wall all around
A clay bowl is molded;
But the use of the bowl
Will depend on the part
Of the bowl that is void."

"Hubs? Bowls? I don't understand."

"Let me explain. The story of the professor who slept 'more slowly' illustrates what I mean. What others chose to label 'sleeping longer than' the professor chose to label 'sleeping slower than'. Since both labels encompassed the same state of affairs, *they both meant the same thing*. You told me what killed Caton, how he was killed, and who killed him. But you used labels like 'murder,' 'weapon,' and 'Christian,' and I accepted them. When I realized this, I put the labels to a test.

"Which man's character—or behavioral pattern, if you wish—would allow him to kill with six other men watching? And there is no question of the men's having seen the crime committed: each one saw it. Chang, who we agreed lacked maturity? Paul Caton, who shares this fault? Dresser, the diplomat? Yamamitsu, who feels the need to be what we have labeled a hatchet-man?

"The motives each had are political, and we generally label political murders 'assassinations.' There is a significance in the shades of meaning. Murderers do not mean to get caught; to assassins this is not always important.

"Reflecting on this, I asked my-

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self: Was it planned?" Balfour raised his hand to forestall the imminent objection. "No, no. I don't mean to suggest that it was completely spontaneous. I mean, was it planned in the manner of good detective novels, where each contingency has been accounted for in advance and in some way used?"

"And what is the answer?" Ishikawa asked.

"I concluded that it was not. It was not planned the way it came off. That is why the killer has to confess."

"What did you say?"

"I know. It sounds ridiculous. But whether I am right or wrong on this point matters very little. I only mean to point out that in this case the killer had a windfall and used it."

"What windfall?"

"One that came by way of an answer to another question, which is: What is the first psychological reaction of a Roman Catholic to the possibility of death?"

"What?"

"Please listen to me carefully," Balfour said slowly. "There are phenomena in religion as real and predictable as in physics. I am not commenting on the truth, validity, or proofs of religious concepts; I am talking about religious phenomena. Every Catholic is a good Catholic at the hour of his death. His whole training—more than that, what a psychologist would call conditioning—has been oriented toward an accounting at this final moment. Regardless of what a Catholic has been, if he was raised a Catholic, when death is at hand he has only one concern—preparing himself for it. And I suspect that this is equally true of religious people of other faiths.

"This concept is not new. I refer you to Alexander Pope: 'As the twig is bent, so the tree inclines'. Or Napoleon: 'Give me a child and I will have the man'.

"In other words, Henri Caton spent the last few seconds of his life praying. I don't mean to imply that he thought: 'I am dying. I shall now pray.' I mean that he felt the impact of the blade and his mind was filled with the knowledge of death and with prayers. The two concepts in his mind were inseparable. The effect was like being stunned; the result was his silent death.

"Now there are several kinds of impossibilities, but one that you cannot fool with is logical impossibility. One moment Caton was alive, the next he was dead. Did Dresser see a 'wan smile' or was it more properly a 'tightening of the lips'? Was Henri Caton alive when he sat down? *Yes, but he was also dying.* It depends on how you describe it. And what is the difference between the motion of an eighty-year-old sinking in his chair mortally wounded and the normal laborious movements of a man that age?"

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"Chang!" Ishikawa said, astonished. "He killed Caton when he whispered in the old man's ear. It even accounts for the angle of the blade. Caton leaned forward to listen."

"I do not understand the motives of a political martyr," Balfour said. "But obviously one motive is the desire to publicize a cause and, whenever feasible, remove the titular head of the opposition to the cause. This was assassination pure and simple. And Chang has to be caught or the cry of his cause will be a whisper in the gale of power politics. But when the victim did not cry out, Chang seized the opportunity for even greater publicity. Here was a perfect crime, a situation beyond reason. When the wheels of Justice ground to a halt, Chang could walk in, confess, produce the weapon, and reveal to those breathless readers of the bizarre how this 'impossible' crime was committed. There was the key to international publicity, the way to focus the attention of the entire world."

From another window Balfour saw the mountains which form the spine of Japan turning dusty purple. Fuji-san, the Diet Building, and the mountain ridge were the last remaining things which had a recognizable shape. The haze covering the city had begun its nightly task of distorting amd merging. Silent trees in the Palace grounds were writhing, twisting black images on the surface of the moat.

"The poetry set me to thinking of something *hollow* and *portable* that could be used to contain a spring to trigger the blade—and at the same time *be innocent enough not to alarm the victim if he saw it in the killer's hand*. So, Inspector, for evidence—unassailable, cold, empirical facts that you can bring into court—Chang's fingerprints will be found on the object in the room, in full view of everyone, which contained the lethal blade . . . You referred to the contents of the vase on the desk as 'writing instruments.' But what is a Japanese 'writing instrument'? A brush with a *hollow* bamboo stem."

●

EQMM READERS VETO LETTER COLUMN—

In our Jan. 1961 issue, we asked you for a yes or no vote on a proposed letter column in EQMM. Your flood of mail—we were amazed by the volume—swamped the idea—20 to 1 against. So, *no letter column,* and we are deeply grateful for your huge response.

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A little Grand Guignol to stimulate your 'tec taste buds . . .

The Terrible-Tempered O'Boyle

by STEPHEN BARR

THE BEST TIME TO GO TO TIM'S IS mid-afternoon, before the five o'clock crowd gets there. Later on you run into the dinner crowd, and still later in the evening things disintegrate and the conversation becomes predictable and a little too loud.

This particular afternoon I went in there at 3:30. It was a sunny, warm day and the Elevated—which had not yet been taken down—was casting comforting shadows on Third Avenue. Matthew was pouring a bucket of ice into the beer cooler and he nodded to me.

At the front end of the bar was a thin little man, sitting with his shoulders against the wall and holding a glass of the still ale that Matthew keeps in a small keg in the rear. It's never iced, so they don't serve it in summer.

I sat down and the little man immediately raised his glass to me.

"A fine day," he said. "Will you join me?"

Matthew had made up a scotch highball as soon as he saw me come in, and he now put it in front of me. "Thanks," I said to the little man, "but I think I'll stick to my usual."

The little man did not pursue the matter. Instead, he craned around and peered up out of the windows, shaking his head. "I'll be sorry to see it go," he said. "Tearing everything down these days—why don't they leave things be?"

"What?" I said. "Oh, the El. Yes, it's too bad. I've always liked the El, though I guess it's pretty noisy to live near."

"It's this passion for civic improvement, is what," said the little man. "That, and the desire on the part of the black-hearted landlords to rake in a few extra thousands!"

"We'll be moving too," Matthew said. "We just got the notice."

"Oh, no!" I said.

"'Twill be only a few doors down from here," Matthew said, and moved back to the beer cooler.

"For a few pennies," the little man said, "them landlords'll sell their mother's gravestone. Did you ever meet Michael O'Boyle? He used to work for a firm of contractors in Queens, but he lived nearby and he'd be in here from time to time."

"I don't think so," I said. "The name doesn't ring a bell."

"Well, he had *real* trouble with his landlord. Him and his wife occupied this tiny little basement apartment over on East Forty-eighth where the development is now. The house was next to that rundown hotel and that's what

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caused the trouble eventually. O'Boyle was always one of these stubborn fellows, but it got so no one could speak to him." He drank some of his ale.

"Oh?" I said. "What was the trouble?"

"The landlord had a friend he wanted to give O'Boyle's little apartment to. He tried palming the friend off as his brother first—a landlord has the right to turn you out for a member of his family—but O'Boyle was on to this. He knew the friend wasn't no relative, and he went down to the rent control and swore out an affidavit. The landlord was hopping mad and began scheming up ways to get O'Boyle out of there.

"He occupied the floor right over him, and he decided music was the ticket. If there's one thing that don't soothe a contrary-minded man it's music, especially when he's trying to get a good night's sleep. I ran into O'Boyle here at this bar around that time and he looked like he'd bite your head off. 'What's eatin' on you, O'Boyle?' I says to him, and he tells me about his landlord. 'Maybe you better give up and move out of there. Be simpler.' 'I will like hell,' he says, and turns away from me. Anyhow I subsequently heard what he did about the music.

"It seems the landlord would put his radio face-down on the floor and turn it on—not loud enough to be heard in the street, but down in O'Boyle's place it was like being in a soundbox. O'Boyle went to the cops, but they won't do anything save the complaint comes from another building, or across the street. So O'Boyle, who knew a bit about electricity, got some wires and what-all, and rigged up something called a radio siren, and all that came out of the landlord's radio was a loud buzz—which he don't like, so he gave up the music angle and thought up another one. Speaking of which: Matthew, will you pull me another of these?"

"Well, sir, this landlord was resourceful, and he took to storing a box right outside O'Boyle's door in the hallway. The box said Glassware on it, but what was in there was chicken legs and codfish heads, and the smell was terrible after a while. O'Boyle didn't bother with the Health Department—he went straight to the fire station. The Inspector came around and ordered the box removed. Can't obstruct the halls, he said. You'll be fined the next time, he said, and the landlord had to throw it out.

"About this time O'Boyle's wife begins saying how she couldn't stay in a place where one thing after another was going on all the time. Let's find ourselves another place, she says, and O'Boyle says *you* can if you want to, I'm sticking. There must have been a terrible row with her saying why don't you try and patch things up with the landlord and him saying he won't have her going behind his back. So it seems,

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what with everything and O'Boyle going around like a sick bear, she up and left. Nothing would move *him,* though.

"Then along about spring the whole block goes up for sale. It seems this big company was maybe going to buy up everything in sight and put up a housing project. O'Boyle's landlord sees his big chance—here's a way to get O'Boyle out. You see, the house was right on the edge of the property the company hoped to get. Like I tell you, it's right next to this hotel, and the company don't want the hotel—it's not for sale, anyhow. The thing was, the landlord would sell and out would go O'Boyle on his ear.

"Well, it looked easy—the company made an offer and the landlord promptly accepted it, and O'Boyle was served with a dispossess. He had till September and then he'd have to go. The landlord was so delighted he took the summer off and went somewheres upstate to fish.

"I ran into O'Boyle again and I didn't even dare say hello to him. He just sat looking into his beer and I was afraid I'd get the mug in my head if I asked questions. Terrible temper, that O'Boyle has. Then a couple weeks later I see him again, and by St. Patrick if he don't ask me to have a drink with him! Well, O'Boyle, I says to him, things seem to be looking up with you. What happened—your wife come back?

"He says, no, she ain't, and gives me a hard look. Who wants her? he says—always going behind my back!

"She's one of them thin nagging blondes, know what I mean? Always at O'Boyle about something or other. So I change the subject and ask how he's making out with the landlord. He gives me a sly look and then he tells me. Boy, did he really fix that landlord!

"Right after the landlord left on his fishing trip, O'Boyle found himself another place not far away, and he began moving his stuff over into it. He'd made one remark to me that I didn't get the drift of at the time: he said I'll *leave* that so-and-so something to remember me by! And along about June he started bringing things into the *old* apartment, and what they were was bags of cement and bags of sand.

"The law says when you move out of a place you can't take none of the fixtures—but it don't say you can't take something *in*. O'Boyle would bring six, seven bags at a time in his old jalopy, and usually late at night. That little basement of his probably didn't hold more than fifteen, maybe eighteen hundred cubic foot; so in a few weeks he was finished and moved into his new place and sat down to wait." The little man tapped the bar and held out his glass for another.

"Wait for what?" I asked.

"For it to harden," the little man said. "I forgot to mention he also

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brought some other stuff in, too. Scrap iron and pieces of broken machinery. What he'd been doing was fill that little basement apartment of his smack full of solid concrete.

"He started at one end, using some old planks for a form, and worked up till he was near enough to the ceiling so a cat couldn't of crawled in there; then he'd move forward another couple feet and run up another layer. All the time he was throwing in those pieces of old iron and rusty steel bolts, making his mix out in the hallway where he had his trough, and where there was a utility sink with a faucet. He put the last batch in through the front windows, and went home to his new place and let her set. Then the landlord came back.

"Him and another guy went over to see if everyone was out of the house, but when they came to O'Boyle's place they couldn't get the door open—the key turned but the door wouldn't bulge. They went out and tried to look in the windows but they couldn't see nothing but solid cement. So they go back and try and break the door in.

"Well, sir, the upshot was that the landlord didn't sell his house. The company wouldn't pay when they found this whacking big block of concrete, so they just bypassed him. The landlord got himself a stableful of lawyers, and they tell O'Boyle he's got to remove it, but he says to go ahead and sue. The law says nothing about me having to remove anything, he says. If I refuse to, I just forfeit it and the ownership passes to you, is all. It's your headache, not mine, says O'Boyle.

"Meantime, the workmen are trying to break up the block of concrete, but she won't break up on account of all that metal, and they couldn't drill, either. They'd go in a few inches and hit a piece of machinery casting, and—ping! They had that block looking like Swiss cheese but they couldn't split her up.

"Time was running short because the development company says it's up to him—they'll start clearing ground in October and he's got to get that apartmentful of concrete out of the way. So he's frantic. Try dynamite, he says to the workmen. Can't do it says the foreman, the hotel next door won't allow it. What the hell do you mean they won't allow it? says the landlord. Why, the size blast we'd need to blow this chunk of stuff would knock in the side of the hotel, the foreman tells him.

"So the landlord rushes back to the company and says why can't they build *over* it? It don't stick up much above the street level, he says. But they say the high-class type of building they're going to put up needs all its ground-floor space. That's where we'll be putting in some shops, they say, and who

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ever heard of a fancy shop with a great ugly block of concrete sticking up in the middle of it halfway to the ceiling? No, you go ahead and take it away, and then we'll buy. And that's how it is."

The little man got off his stool and settled with Matthew. Then he nodded goodbye and went out onto Third Avenue, glowering at where the Elevated still was. Matthew caught my eye.

"Gab, gab, gab," he said. "Talk, talk, talk. That one'll go to any length to get himself an audience."

"What happened to O'Boyle?" I asked. "Did his wife finally come back to him?"

Matthew went on mopping the bar where the little man had been sitting, and then turned to me.

"Who's to say she ever left?" he said at last. "Will you be having one on the house before you go?"

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THE BLACK DISK

by HELEN McCLOY

(*continued from page 38*)

"Yes, I am Leo Benda, thirty years ago a poor immigrant boy and now—" His gloved palm stroked the rich fur of the lap robe that lay across his knees. "And now one of the most successful businessmen in Pearson City."

Alec suppressed a grin. "Businessman" was good.

Benda went on, "Let that little incident be a lesson to you, Mr. Norton. The police have great respect for my judgment, and they know that I am entirely satisfied with their conduct of the Beauclerk case."

"How did you know my name?"

"I took pains to find out all about you after Max reported your presence in Room 1105 last night. He had visited the suite the previous evening and found it vacant."

A sardonic smile touched Benda's lips lightly. "My men have been watching you all day, Mr. Norton. I am disturbed by their reports. I hope that I may persuade you to leave Pearson City at once. If you are wise, you will forget that you ever heard the name Diana Beauclerk."

"And if I don't?"

"It would be a pity—a great pity." The black eyes in the blanched face looked as unnatural as eyes peering through a pulpy, papier-mâché mask. "I'm afraid you're not taking this seriously, Mr. Norton."

Alec saw that Benda was trying to frighten him. For that very reason Alec no longer felt afraid. If Benda had wanted to kill Alec, he would have been a dead man by this time.

So Alec answered boldly, "Do you expect me to take this seriously?"

"You are a brave man." Benda's voice was softer than ever. "I am sorry. I had hoped you would have what Meredith calls the grain of common sense at the heart of all cowardice. I'll give you twenty-four hours to leave Pearson City, Mr. Norton. There's a New York train tomorrow evening at five fifty-three. I sincerely hope you will decide to take it. Max!"

Benda turned to the mute and spoke in a foreign language which Alec did not understand. Max opened the door and got out.

"Good night, Mr. Norton," said Benda.

Alec stepped down to the curb, paused, and turned. "How did your friend Max lose his palate?"

Benda smiled slowly and unpleasantly. "Almost anyone in

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Pearson City can tell you. It's an old story. Good night, Mr. Norton."

Max climbed into the driver's seat and the car glided away smoothly. There was nothing left but the mark of tires in the snow to show Alec that he had not been dreaming.

At ten the next morning Alec entered the offices occupied by Kimball and Stacy, lawyers, on the twenty-first floor of Pearson City's tallest skyscraper.

A clerk showed him into a library walled with calf-bound tomes of the law. Already waiting there was a woman in a long, supple mink coat. She had dark hair turning gray and dark, worried eyes. She waited restlessly, crossing and uncrossing slim ankles, playing with doeskin gloves, lighting one cigarette after another from a tortoise-shell case.

At last Clement Kimball appeared. He was a big, pleasant-looking fellow in his early fifties, with shrewd eyes and a genial mouth. He was surprised to see the woman. "Why, Margaret!" he said.

She crushed her cigarette in an ashtray and crossed the room to his side. "Any news about Marty?" There was deep feeling in her voice.

"No." Kimball's answer came soberly.

"Isn't there anything I can do? Anything?" Her voice was urgent.

"My dear, we're doing everything we can." Kimball's big hand lay gently on her shoulder. "Better go home. Get some rest."

"I'll go home. But I can't rest." She pulled her coat collar up around her lined face and left them without another word.

Kimball turned to Alec. "Mr. Norton? That was my wife. Forgive me for not introducing you but she's in such a state. She couldn't be more worried if she were Martin Stacy's own mother."

Kimball drove Alec to the city prison where Martin Stacy was being held. An officer led them down a long, bleak corridor with the cool, earthy smell of a cellar. They entered a small room divided by a grille of steel.

On the other side of the grille stood the boy Alec had seen in the newspaper cut with Jean. His tumbled hair made him look younger than he actually was. There was still a bruise under his right eye where he had "fallen downstairs." No wonder he looked dazed and uncertain of himself.

"I have just one question to ask you," said Alec. "Have you ever seen anything like this before?" He held out the black disk.

Martin strained his eyes through the grille. "No," he said at last. "What is it?"

"Are you sure you saw nothing like this in Diana Beauclerk's suite when you were there the night of the murder?"

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"Quite sure. If it was there I didn't see it."

Outside again in the pale winter sunshine Kimball turned his car toward Wickford, the real estate project being promoted by Diana Beauclerk's divorced husband, Daniel Forbes.

Kimball drove in silence until Alec spoke. "Have you any idea who the man was Diana Beauclerk planned to marry?"

Kimball frowned. "The police think it was Martin. They got to know each other when Martin and I handled her divorce from Forbes three years ago. The police claim that they were lovers—that Martin got tired of her and killed her when she threatened suit for breach of promise. Of course it's nonsense. She was ten years older than Martin. He barely noticed her."

Wickford was a raw, new development. Tarred roads and asphalt sidewalks divided meadow and wasteland into checkerboard squares. There were only two houses—one finished, the other in the lath-and-plaster stage.

Kimball halted his car before the finished house, a naked cube of white stucco without shrubbery or trees. A billboard proclaimed the office of Daniel Forbes, dealer in real estate. Lots 100 ft. x 75 ft. Price $5,000.

Forbes himself answered the doorbell. He was young, but his face was set in a permanent frown of worry. He wore practical country clothes—high shoes laced almost to the knee, an old pair of riding breeches, and a mackinaw.

"Oh, it's you." His face fell when he saw Kimball. "I thought it was somebody come to buy a lot." He led the way into a roomy, plainly furnished office.

"How's business?" asked Alec after introductions.

"Not so good." Forbes's grin twisted wryly. "I suppose that gives me a motive. I could never have paid the lump sum Diana demanded. And I haven't an alibi either. My wife and I were alone together all evening and a wife's testimony doesn't carry much weight in a case like this. Everybody assumes she'll lie like a lady to save her husband's life. But I didn't do it." His grin faded. "Diana must've got her claws into some other poor guy and he shot her. I don't believe it was Stacy."

"Why not?"

"He's just starting his career. Not enough dough for Diana. Too much like me. She wouldn't make the mistake of marrying a poor man the second time."

When Alec and Kimball rose to go, Forbes went with them to the front door. Two people were coming up on the porch—a little girl in a scarlet ski suit and a big girl in a shabby old rabbit's-fur coat. Both were pink-cheeked, wholesome, and gay. Forbes introduced them with pride.

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"My wife and daughter."

The little girl had trouble curtsying in her ski suit. "My pants are too stiff," she explained solemnly. The big girl hailed Kimball with outstretched hands. The seam of one glove was mended with tiny, looped stitches. There was a neat darn in one stocking. Obviously she did all her own mending.

Alec thought: *If she belonged to me I'd hate asking her to go without things so I could pay Diana Beauclerk alimony. Forbes had a double motive: Beauclerk was driving him to bankruptcy and he couldn't face it with a second wife and a child to support.*

Alec showed Forbes the black disk—casually, as if it were an afterthought instead of the purpose of this interview.

Forbes eyed it without apparent interest. "Doesn't mean a thing to me."

Alec looked up and met Mrs. Forbes' gaze. Her cheeks were a bloodless white now. Her eyes were glazed and stony, fixed on the black disk.

"You recognize this, Mrs. Forbes?" ventured Alec.

Her face seemed to grow sharper. "No." Her lips formed the word, but only the thinnest sound came from her throat. She tried again. "I've never seen anything like it before."

Alec knew she was lying.

As they drove back to Pearson City, Alec gave Kimball a detailed account of the finding of the black disk.

"I'd like to hear the chambermaid's story from her own lips," said Kimball. "She's an important witness."

But when they stopped at the hotel, the management couldn't find Marie Chester. None of the staff had seen her for some hours.

"She must be out to lunch," suggested the housekeeper. "Try again after one o'clock."

Alec and Kimball ate at the Stacy house with Jean. Coffee was served in a long room with windows overlooking a winter landscape of acid-pale sunshine and yesterday's shop-worn snow.

They sat around a roaring fire of birch logs that gave the room color and light as well as warmth. Alec told the others about his interview with Benda. He ended with his questioning Benda about Max and Benda's unpleasant tone.

"I've heard the story about Max." Kimball's coffee cup rattled in its saucer. "Not a nice story."

"Tell us, Uncle Kim!" pleaded Jean.

Kimball lit a cigarette. A thin blue veil of smoke drifted across his handsome face. "Did you ever hear of the Hand of Satan?"

"No. It sounds dreadful."

"It is. It's an instrument invented in one of the Balkan countries and used there by pseudo-political secret societies to punish turncoats and

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squealers. It's made of steel and looks something like a skeleton hand with five fingers. The nails are pointed and razor-edged.

"When a man has talked too much to the wrong people, the men he has betrayed capture him and force the Hand down his throat. It lacerates the palate, rips the vocal chords and other delicate tissues of the throat to shreds. The throat is cut from the inside. Usually the victim bleeds to death. Sometimes he dies more slowly of infection. But if he is unusually lucky, he recovers and remains a mute for the rest of his life."

"And—" Jean's hand went to her own throat. She spoke through white lips. "And Max was—lucky?"

"According to the story, it happened in Bucharest and Max was rescued before the Hand had been pushed all the way down his throat. The police there urged him to make a written statement accusing his assailants, but he refused. He was afraid he might not be so lucky next time.

"It may be just a yarn—I wouldn't know. They say this Max has never learned the sign language of mutes. He can still hear and read and write, but only in one language—Rumanian. As Leo Benda is the only person I know of in Pearson City who speaks Rumanian, this makes Max his absolute property."

"Very convenient—from Benda's point of view!" exclaimed Alec.

"That, I imagine, is the only point of view that interests Benda," replied Kimball.

"It's too horrible to think about!" cried Jean. "Mr. Norton, you must take the next train back to New York."

Alec laughed and looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. "It's only two p.m. Benda gave me until five fifty-three. A lot can be done in nearly four hours—perhaps more than he realizes."

"I wish you would go." Jean's voice wavered. "I can't help feeling Benda is up to something. I saw him once in a night club. He was—" she searched for a word—"evil."

"I've had the same feeling," agreed Kimball. "I've seen him in the criminal courts when his men were on the witness stand. He looks like a sophisticated sadist—a man who enjoys cruelty for its own sake. Perhaps it would be better if you did go back to New York, Norton. I can take the black disk to the District Attorney and tell him the whole story. He'll jump at the chance of getting something on Benda. The Governor appointed him for that very purpose and he has a staff of trained detectives who should be able to identify the black disk more quickly than you could."

"When was he appointed?" asked Alec.

"Six months ago."

"And he hasn't got anything on

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Benda yet? He must be either crooked or incompetent! Our Mr. Benda doesn't hide his light under a bushel. I wouldn't trust a District Attorney like that with the one concrete clue in the case."

"Then—you're going on with this?" Jean's eyes were wide and bright with fear.

"I'm not a quitter either!" Alec grinned. "You should be glad of it. Your brother is still in grave danger. The fact that Benda wants me to leave town proves that he is in the plot to protect the real murderer and to railroad your brother. But I don't believe Benda will dare to try any tricks on me. After all, he's only a racketeer with police pull in a middle-sized Western city and I am an employee of a national organization, the Syndicated Press. If I were killed or injured, the S.P. would make things so hot for him he'd burn to a crisp—and he knows it. That's why he didn't dare lay a finger on me yesterday."

"Just what are you going to do?" Jean's voice was taut.

"Identify the black disk and trace it back to the murderer who dropped it in Diana Beauclerk's hotel suite."

Jean rose. "When do we start?"

"We?"

"Sure. I'm in on this. Marty is my brother."

Alec shook his head. "It's one thing to take chances for myself, but I'm not going to take chances for anyone else."

"You're not taking chances for me—I'm taking them for myself." Jean lifted that firm little chin. Her eyes were shining. "And you said there was no danger to an employee of the Syndicated Press. Can't I be your secretary or something? Temporarily?"

Alec admired pluck too much to refuse her. But Kimball shook his head, looking suddenly older and frailer.

"I don't like this," he muttered. "I don't like it at all."

In the hall Alec consulted a classified telephone directory. From a dozen companies listed under *Cardboard* he chose one at random —Elk River Mills Inc. As he climbed into Jean's car, he gave her the address.

"Don't look now." Her eyes were on the rear-view mirror. "But there's another car following us. Black limousine."

"Sure?" asked Alec.

"I'll make sure." She took the next corner on two wheels and just skinned through a changing light. Alec glanced back over his shoulder. A long car had halted for the red light. It was a black limousine.

"That settled their hash!" cried Jean gleefully.

"I hope so." Alec's voice was uneasy. He remembered that Benda's car had been a black limousine.

The Elk River Mills had large offices in a modern building. Alec

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and Jean passed from secretary to secretary until they reached a Mr. Grimes—a small man with a big office all to himself. He examined the edge of the black disk under a magnifying glass. Then he measured the thickness against a little steel gadget with adjustable jaws.

"Bindersboard!"

Alec and Jean were no wiser than before.

Mr. Grimes explained. "Most cardboard is made by pasting two or more sheets of paper pulp together. That's why it's called pasteboard. But bindersboard is made from a single sheet compressed at a pressure ranging from two hundred to four hundred tons. The finished board is almost two and a half times thinner than the original sheet. Density gives it exceptional stiffness and a smooth, hard-rolled finish like vulcanite. What is this funny little disk used for?"

Jean groaned aloud. Alec said, "We were hoping *you* could tell *us!* Can't you hazard a guess—now you've identified the grade of cardboard it's made of?"

"Good heavens, no! Bindersboard is used for dozens of things. You'd better see Stubbs. He's a jobber who buys all grades of cardboard from us in large quantities and then sells it in small lots to manufacturers of cardboard objects. He might be willing to give you a list of his customers for bindersboard and you might find some company among them that manufacture disks like this. Stubbs' address is 225 Greenwood Lane."

The sun had disappeared. The city was colorless as a black and white print, stone buildings and leafless trees dark against a pale, pearl sky.

As the car started Jean said quietly, "That man's here again."

Alec looked in the rear-view mirror. A long black limousine was just behind them. In the treacherous half light it was impossible to see the driver.

"Better go home and let me take over," said Alec.

"Certainly not! Where is Greenwood Lane? It sounds rustic and quaint."

It was neither. It ran through the older part of the city, a dusty region of small factories and warehouses. It was hardly more than an alley, paved with cobblestones. On either side stood dingy, brick houses that must have been comfortable homes seventy years ago. Now they were used as warehouses by distributors of wholesale goods. Delivery wagons parked before yawning double doorways made progress difficult.

Again Alec looked in the rear-view mirror. No sign of the limousine now. He frowned. He liked his enemies to be where he could see them.

No. 225 was hardly more than a shell. Every floor and partition had been torn away, leaving the house one big storeroom four stories

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high. Every window had been bricked up.

A single, bald electric bulb made little impression on the cavernous darkness within. Workmen were loading a truck with rolls of pasteboard. A foreman in overalls was comparing a bill of lading with a ledger. To him Alec explained their errand.

"Boss ain't here, but I guess there's no harm in letting ye know what companies use bindersboard, seeing as old Grimes sent ye." He flipped the pages of his ledger.

"Fletcher Bindery uses it for bookbinding—Mannering Body Company for the insides of sedan cars—Singleton Brothers for boxes—Ashley and Marx for cartridges—Daniel Fuerst and Company for lining upholstered furniture—Artists Supply Company for etching boards—Diamond Pattern Company for templet board—Machinists Accessory Company for gaskets—Sophisticated Lady Hosiery Company for spools—Dunlap Shoe Company for stiffeners—Fur Workers Supply Company for furriers' accessories—Ideal Toy and Counter Company for game boards and—"

"Hey, wait a minute!" Alec was scribbling frantically on the back of an old envelope, wondering what a "templet" was and what you did with a "gasket." "Are there any firms connected with real estate or house construction that use bindersboard?"

"Blake and Brandt use it inside the walls and ceiling of a house."

"Did they build any of the new houses at Wickford?"

"Couldn't say offhand. But they probably did. They get all the fat construction jobs around here."

"Ever see anything like this before?" Alec dropped the black disk on the ledger.

"Naw." The foreman squinted as he held it up to the light. "Cut with a die. That's funny."

Alec's attention quickened. "What's funny about it?"

"Bindersboard is so tough it wears out the cutting edge of a die quicker than pasteboard. Manufacturers who die-cut cardboard into little shapes like this here use pasteboard to save wear on the die."

"But there are exceptions?"

"Never saw one before. But this disk is made with bindersboard and it was cut with a die."

Alec's eyes brightened. At last he had discovered something unique about the black disk—something that might prove significant.

It was only five o'clock but the stars were out, the street lamps lighted.

"Let's go to a drug store," said Alec. "I want a telephone directory."

The car bumped over the cobblestones. At the corner where Greenwood Lane emptied into Brickett Street, Jean slowed down. At this hour there was little traffic

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in the neighborhood. Its factories and warehouses were empty except for an occasional night watchman. Its street lamps were the only source of light.

The car had hardly moved another yard when she stamped on the brake. A big, black limousine without lights shot out of the side street parallel with Greenwood Lane.

The limousine cut in front of Jean's two-seater, so close it almost grazed her radiator. Its door swung open. Something long, inert, and shapeless fell before Jean's front wheels.

The limousine gathered speed. Like a phantom car it disappeared into the darkness without noise or lights. The license number was veiled in shadow. But Alec recognized the familiar silhouette.

He pushed open the door beside him and tumbled out of the two-seater. Jean was at his heels.

"Don't come," he warned her. "This is going to be nasty."

She stammered, "It—it was a body, wasn't it?"

The headlights of the car shone like twin spotlights on a woman huddled face down in the roadway. Gently Alec turned her over. Dark hair framed a pale face, thin and worn as a profile on an old coin. The eyes were glazed and vacant, the lips parted. Dark blood bubbled out of her mouth, trickled down her chin to her collar. But she was still breathing.

"W-who is she?" Jean's hand was on his shoulder, shaking.

"Marie Chester, the chambermaid whose story was suppressed." Alec was so angry that he forgot to be afraid. He would have made a splendid target kneeling in that blaze of light. But he wasn't thinking of that. He was searching for a wound. Blood pouring from the mouth usually meant a wound in lungs or stomach. The wound must be staunched before he moved her.

"Were we—meant to find her?"

"I don't believe in coincidence," Alec answered without looking up.

"What have they done to her?"

Alec hadn't the heart to answer that question. There was no wound in lungs or stomach. Yet blood continued to pour from the throat. The Hand of Satan was no myth. It had been used.

"We must drive to a hospital," said Alec. "Quick!"

At the hospital Jean waited in an anteroom while Alec interviewed the chief surgeon. When he returned his face was hard and bleak as granite.

"Marie Chester is dead. She insisted on leaving a written statement describing what she saw the night Beauclerk was murdered. She had to write it herself. She couldn't dictate. She couldn't utter a sound."

Jean caught her breath. "It's unbelievable!"

"Benda wanted to silence a wit-

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ness," retorted Alec. "He used a barbaric method in order to frighten other witnesses. These things do happen. Ask any police reporter. In New York she might have been sealed in a block of wet cement and dropped into the East River as soon as the cement had hardened. Its weight keeps a body from rising to the surface, so there's no evidence of murder. Benda doesn't care if there's evidence or not because of his pull with the police department."

"He threatened you!" cried Jean. "You must leave Pearson City at once!"

Alec shook his head. "I thought I was pretty plucky defying Benda yesterday—the little tin hero! Now I see it differently. I was never really in danger. As I said this afternoon, Benda would think twice before attacking an employee of the Syndicated Press. But my stubbornness put other people in danger—all the other obscure little people without pull or money who are involved in the case—people whom Benda is not afraid to attack. That's what makes me mad! I'm responsible for what happened to Marie Chester. I'm going to get Benda if it's the last thing I ever do and I'm going to get him before he has time to hurt anyone else."

Jean didn't hesitate. "I'm with you. What can I do?"

"Too dangerous."

"But—"

"No buts." Alec rose.

"Won't you tell me where you're going?"

"I'm going to take you home first."

"And then?"

"The less you know the safer you'll be. I want you to go home and stay there—no matter what happens."

"You'll let me know what happens?" She sounded almost meek.

"By eight p.m. at the latest."

When Alec left Jean at her house his glance fell on the clock in the hall. It was just five fifty-four. Benda's ultimatum had expired.

Alec walked to the nearest cigar store. In the telephone booth he found a classified directory and made a list of the companies listed under *dies*. Altogether there were eleven. He thought longingly of Jean's little two-seater, but it was too well known to Benda's men by this time. Alec hailed a taxi and set out to visit the die companies one by one.

The first two were closed for the night. The third and fourth were still open but no one at either place recognized the black disk. The fifth was just closing as Alec reached the sales department.

"I want a little information," he explained to a clerk. "I want to know if this disk was cut by one of your dies?"

The clerk looked at the black disk and frowned. "Another complaint?

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Do you think I have nothing better to do than listen to your belly-aching? The die we sold you would've lasted years if you'd used pasteboard like everybody else! No die in the world will stand up to bindersboard for any length of time!"

"Just a minute," cried Alec. "There's a misunderstanding."

"You betcha life there's a misunderstanding!"

"Just tell me one thing," interrupted Alec. "What company has been using your dies to cut disks like this from bindersboard?"

The clerk stared in astonishment. "Don't you know? I thought you came from them!"

"'Them'? Who?"

"Why, the Fur Workers Supply Company, of course!"

Samuel Stern of the Fur Workers Supply Company was just shutting up shop for the night. He received Alec in a low-ceiling room behind the shop. On the work table were the tools of the furrier's trade—rubber skulls and glass eyes for mounting fox heads, knives and needles and thread for working in fur, great bolts of heavy silk for lining coats, wadded cushions for lining muffs.

"Can you tell me what this is?" asked Alec.

Stern took the black disk and smiled as if the question were absurdly simple. "It's a button fastener."

"And what is a button fastener?"

"A button is never sewed to a fur coat," explained Stern. "Fur skin is so tender that the pull of the threads would soon wear a hole in it. So you take a flat disk with slots on either side, pass a narrow piece of tape around the disk, through the slots, and knot it. Then you cut a small slit in the fur skin and slide the disk in edgewise. Once it is lodged between fur and lining you turn the disk so it lies flat and flush with the fur. Then the diameter is too wide for the disk to slip back through the slit it entered edgewise. The two ends of knotted tape hang down outside the slit on the fur side. They are passed through a loop on the underside of the button and knotted again. This holds the button firmly in place without wearing a hole in the fur. We call such a disk a button fastener. As long as it is in place, the button cannot fall off."

"But if great force were exerted?" said Alec. "If someone seized a button and tugged with all his might? Wouldn't the flat side of the button fastener press against the slit in the fur until it was split wider? Then wouldn't button and tape and button fastener all come loose together and fall off the coat?"

Stern looked at Alec with eyes bright under bushy gray brows. "People don't often indulge in a rough and tumble when they're wearing fur coats."

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"What if someone wearing a fur coat committed a murder and the victim seized a button in the death struggle?"

"It would happen just as you described it."

"And the button fastener might fall on the floor and roll away by itself?"

"Certainly—if the tape came unknotted." Stern touched the nameless clue—no longer nameless. "I have heard of buttons being found at the scene of a crime. But a button fastener is something new."

"One more question." Alec was tense as he leaned across the work table. "Is there any way of distinguishing this particular button fastener from all others so that it can be traced to the coat from which it was torn?"

Stern held the disk under a desk lamp. "You may call it luck, or you may call it Providence, but this particular button fastener *is* unusual. So unusual that I believe it might be traced to one particular coat."

"How?"

"Usually button fasteners are made of pasteboard or leather. Only one manufacturer of furriers' tools was ever foolish enough to make button fasteners out of bindersboard—myself. My son is just out of college and full of bright ideas that won't work. This is one of them. Bindersboard makes fine button fasteners but it wore out our new die in a few days. We've gone back to pasteboard. So far we've only sold one sackful of button fasteners made from bindersboard. That sack went to Newton and Brill, retail furriers here in Pearson City. They can give you a list of customers who have bought fur coats containing button fasteners made from bindersboard. As Newton and Brill only bought the sack a few weeks ago, there won't be many names on the list. In fact, the chances are that only one of those names will be connected with the murder you are investigating."

Alec looked at his watch. "The shop will be closed by this time. Can I reach Newton or Brill tonight?"

"Brill lives at 52 Reade Street."

Alec had dismissed his taxi. Now there was none in sight. He set out on foot for Reade Street, hoping to pick up a taxi on his way. He was still in the business section where there was little traffic at night. The street lamps were too far apart for comfort. Islands of light around each lamp only made the shadows between more confusing than ever. Where the light did shine, the long, gray asphalt street looked as empty as a bowling alley. After a while he heard footfalls behind him.

He quickened his pace. The footfalls quickened, too.

A light, cool sweat broke out on his forehead. Had he been wrong in assuming that his Syndicated Press job would protect him from Benda? If any of Benda's men had

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trailed Alec to Samuel Stern's tonight they must realize that he had identified the button fastener and that he would soon be able to identify the murderer. That would make Benda desperate. Courage was one thing, foolhardiness another.

Alec began to run.

The footfalls were running, too. They caught up with him at a corner where there was no street lamp. He turned and lashed out with his right. There were two men. He couldn't see the faces under the hat brims. He thought the shorter figure was Max.

One parried Alec's blow and drove a short jab into his ribs. The other seized Alec's left wrist in both hands and twisted his arm behind his back.

Red-hot pain seared Alec's shoulder. They pushed him toward the mouth of an alley.

The man in front moved his hand. Something grazed Alec's cheek—something pointed and razor-sharp. Into his mind's eye drifted a vision of glazed, vacant eyes, white face, and dark blood bubbling up from a tortured throat. Only the face was no longer Marie Chester's. It was his own.

Panic gave him the strength of a madman. He bent forward from the waist as far as he could. The movement was sudden and powerful. The man clinging to Alec's arm was jerked forward. He lost his balance. His feet left the ground and he hurtled over Alec's head. He collided with the man facing Alec. All three collapsed on the sidewalk in a sprawling heap. Alec was the first to rise. He ran down the alley as he had never run in his life before.

He climbed three fences before he dared stop to catch his breath. He was in a lumber yard deserted for the night. Sweat poured from his body. His breath came in great gasps. Blood trickled down his neck from the scratch on his cheek.

Now he saw the folly of fighting Benda's gang singlehanded. He needed help and the only man who could help him effectively was Kimball. The District Attorney would have to listen to a man as influential as Kimball. It would be time enough to interview Newton and Brill in the morning, but Alec must see Kimball and if possible the District Attorney tonight before Benda made another move.

Kimball's house was near the Stacys' on the outskirts of the city. It took Alec nearly two hours to reach it on foot. There were no taxis in the dark back streets he followed. He dared not cross the broad, brightly lighted streets of the theatrical and restaurant section where there were plenty of taxis for fear he would meet some of Benda's men.

So far as Alec knew, he was not followed. But he could not be sure. He took every precaution as he ap-

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proached Kimball's house. It would be unbearable to be captured now in sight of his goal.

The house faced the state highway at the top of a little hill. It was a solid, red-brick building with a white porte-cochère at one side. Keeping in shadows cast by rosebushes in winter overcoats of straw, Alec made his way up the starlit drive.

The front of the house was dark but he saw an oblong of light shining on the snow from an unshaded French window on the right side. If Kimball was there, Alec could tap on the window for Kimball to let him in. Alec had no wish to kick his heels for five or ten minutes under the porte-cochère while he waited for a servant to answer the doorbell. A lot can happen in five or ten minutes.

He came to the window and looked inside. The room beyond was a library. Lamplight shining on wine-red damask chairs and curtains looked warm and inviting to Alec as he stood outside in the windy winter night.

Kimball was relaxing in an armchair with a book in one hand and a highball on the table beside him. Mrs. Kimball had just come in from the street. She was casting her wraps aside on the sofa. As Alec watched she sank into a chair and lit a cigarette. They were talking but Alec could not hear what they said. It was like a scene from an old silent film.

Alec tapped on the pane of glass before him. Both Kimballs started and lifted their heads. Alec pressed his face against the glass, hoping the light from the room would reach him. It must have done so for Mrs. Kimball smiled and sank back in her chair while Kimball rose and came forward to open the window.

"My dear Norton, what on earth?" Kimball's gaze took in the bleeding scratch on Alec's cheek, his rumpled clothes and snow caked shoes. "Man, you need a drink!" He unlocked an old-fashioned tantalus and brought out a cut-glass decanter.

"You poor boy!" cried Mrs. Kimball. "You look half dead!"

"I am." Before Alec sat down he closed the window behind him and drew the curtains across it. Then he dropped into a chair and took a long pull at the drink Kimball handed him.

"Mr. Norton—my wife."

Alec started to rise but Mrs. Kimball smiled and said, "Don't get up. You really look exhausted and I can see that you want to talk to Kim. I'll leave you two together but I hope you can stay for dinner, Mr. Norton."

"Thanks—"

She left the room and they heard her go upstairs. Kimball sat down behind his writing-table and looked at Alec.

"Well?"

"I've had a tough time," said

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Alec. "But I've got the murderer."

Kimball was startled. "Are you sure? Suspicion is one thing and legal evidence another."

"Here's the evidence. You're a lawyer and you can tell me if I'm right or wrong."

Alec again produced the black disk. As he outlined its history Kimball grew more and more perturbed.

"Marie Chester has testified there was no black disk behind the radiator the morning before Diana Beauclerk was murdered," concluded Alec. "Diana Beauclerk didn't drop the button fastener herself because she didn't have a fur coat with her. I saw all her belongings at the District Attorney's office—her only coat was velveteen. The disk couldn't have been dropped by a man. Men don't wear fur coats. That rules out two chief suspects—Daniel Forbes and Martin Stacy. It also rules out Max and Benda and the hotel men, bellboys, detectives, policemen, and reporters who visited the scene of the crime after the murder.

"There were no women detectives or women reporters working on the case—that was one of Marie Chester's grievances. The only women who have visited the scene of the crime were the hotel maids and Jean Stacy. Maids don't wear fur coats when they're cleaning a room. Jean was wearing a tweed coat.

"Therefore, the button fastener must have been dropped at the scene of the crime by some other woman who had no legitimate business there and everything suggests that this woman was the murderer. Diana Beauclerk was shot with a .22—a woman's gun. Marie Chester saw a woman leave Beauclerk's suite the night of the murder. She went down the corridor to the fire stairs and she was wearing a long, brown coat—doubtless a fur coat, though Marie didn't recognize it as fur in the dim light of the hotel corridor."

"It's quite plausible," admitted Kimball. "But there are so many women in Pearson City who own long, brown fur coats and this button fastener could have come from any one of them."

"Oh, no, it couldn't!" A gleam rekindled in Alec's tired eyes. "That's where luck steps in—or Providence. This particular button fastener is made of bindersboard instead of the usual pasteboard or leather. Only one retail furrier in Pearson City has been using button fasteners made of bindersboard—Newton and Brill. They've only been in use the last six weeks. It's a cinch Newton and Brill have sold only one fur coat in six weeks to a woman who knew Diana Beauclerk. As soon as we see Newton and Brill in the morning, we'll have the murderer's name in black and white. This little disk of bindersboard is going to send her to the chair. I might be sorry—if I

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hadn't seen Marie Chester after Leo Benda's gang got through with her."

"What did they do to her?" demanded Kimball.

Alec told him. His face, usually ruddy, turned a sick, cheesy-white. He muttered incoherently. "Unspeakable—monstrous!"

Alec nodded grimly. "Mrs. Forbes deserves all that's coming to her."

"Mrs. *Forbes?*" The name was a shock to Kimball.

"What other woman had a motive for murdering Diana Beauclerk? Mrs. Forbes was wearing a long, brown rabbit's-fur coat when I saw her and she recognized the button fastener the moment she saw it. She's the sort of woman who would do anything to help her husband. Perhaps she rationalized the murder by telling herself she was protecting her child's future. There are such types in criminal casebooks."

"No doubt, but—" Kimball passed a shaking hand across his forehead. "I've known Nancy Forbes all my life! I'm not a criminal lawyer and I'm not used to this sort of thing." He rose. "I'd better phone the District Attorney and see if he can come over at once. Excuse me—"

Alone, Alec finished his drink and helped himself to a cigarette from the box on Kimball's writing-table.

As Alec's gaze wondered around the room he wondered if he would ever be successful enough to own a home like this where the lamplight brought out ruby highlights in the gleaming surface of wine-red damask and old mahogany. Our here on the edge of the city it was extraordinarily quiet and peaceful.

Suddenly his heart contracted. Then, as if to make up for seconds lost, it pounded double quick, shaking his chest wall, swelling the veins in his temples until they felt tight. These symptoms of shock were caused by the most commonplace of all objects—a telephone.

It was standing on Kimball's writing-table—a perfectly ordinary dial telephone with a French handset in black composition. Superficially, there was nothing alarming about it. But—Kimball had left the room in order to "phone the District Attorney."

Why hadn't he phoned from here?

Alec put the receiver to his ear. He heard the dial tone. The instrument was not out of order.

He replaced the receiver. Again his glance swept the room but this time it was alert, puzzled, searching. On the surface everything seemed normal—green-shaded reading lamp, book shelves rising row on row until they were lost in the shadows of the lofty ceiling, cut-glass decanter of whiskey glinting amber and gold in the lamplight.

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Alec's glance came to a halt. Mrs. Kimball's wraps were still lying on the sofa where she had cast them down—a brown velvet hat, brown suede gloves, and the dark, supple mink coat she had worn at Kimball's office the first day Alec saw her.

A long, brown coat.

A *fur* coat—

In four strides he crossed the room and seized the coat. Sewn to the rich brown satin lining was a label—*Newton and Brill.* In the pelt, under the button, where there should have been a neat slit, there was a wide, jagged tear.

The button had been wrenched off and then replaced by someone ignorant of the furrier's craft. The lips of the tear were roughly basted together with brown silk and the tape on the under side of the button had been sewn to the surface of the fur. There was no button fastener inside.

But the other buttons were held in place properly by a tape passing through a neat slit in the pelt to the inside of the coat. Under each button Alec's probing fingers felt a round, flat disk concealed between fur and lining.

He snatched a pair of office shears from Kimball's writing-table and sawed at one of the slits until it was two inches wide. Then he pulled the button. It came out of the coat.

On its under side, dangling from a loop of tape, was a button fastener—stiff and black, with a smooth, hard-rolled finish.

Bindersboard—

A loud report shattered the stillness. Alec looked up. A bullet splintered a Florentine mirror on the opposite wall. The jagged glass distorted the reflection of a woman —Margaret Kimball.

She stood in the doorway behind Alec. She was aiming a small revolver at his back—a .22. Her painted mouth was crimson against cheeks that had gone chalk-white. But the hand that held the gun was steady.

"You fool!" Her voice was as firm as her hand. "I heard everything you said to Kim. I came downstairs and listened at the door. As soon as you mentioned the button fastener I knew you had to die."

Alec summoned all his self-control. "Won't you have trouble explaining a dead body in your living-room?" he suggested.

"You came in here by the window. The servants will swear they didn't admit you by the front door. I'll swear you attacked me and I shot you in self-defense."

"I see." Alec's thoughts were racing. Any woman like Nancy Forbes who did all her own sewing and mending might recognize the black disk as a button fastener from a fur coat without knowing what particular fur coat it came from. She must have thought Alec knew what the disk was. She was wearing a fur

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coat herself and she had a motive for murdering Beauclerk. She had been frightened for fear he would accuse her of the murder on the strength of those two things. But that didn't prove she was guilty.

Lamplight struck a steady beam of light from a diamond ring on the hand that held the gun. Alec fixed his eyes on that beam. If he could say something to make it waver—just once—

He spoke calmly, almost conversationally. "So Kimball was the man who loved Diana Beauclerk—the rich man she wanted to marry. And you shot her because you were jealous."

"He never loved her!" Margaret Kimball's voice sharpened shrewishly. "That Beauclerk woman was a passing fancy—nothing more!"

"Then why did you kill her?"

"Because she wanted him to divorce me and marry her. And he was so weak—he might have done it!"

"You call that a 'passing fancy'?" Alec managed to laugh.

"Kim wouldn't have protected me after I shot Beauclerk if he hadn't loved me!"

"Kimball wanted to be a United States Senator," retorted Alec. "The *Star* said so in its first story on Stacy's arrest. A man whose wife has murdered his light of love hasn't a dog's chance of getting into the Senate. But do you suppose Kimball loved you after your crime forced him to frame his junior partner in order to save you and himself? Kimball no more loved you than Leo Benda, who only protected you because his racket depended on your husband's political machine for police protection. Kimball framed Stacy to save his career—not to save you! He must hate you!"

"That's a lie!" The diamond ring flashed like a tiny heliograph. Her hand was shaking uncontrollably.

All in one motion Alec turned and crouched and dived at her knees. A second shot rang out, reverberating in the closed room. Something biting as a whiplash stung Alec's neck. She was writhing in his grasp, lithe and fierce as a snake. The hand that held the gun twisted toward him.

He grabbed at it and missed. Unbelieving, he saw the muzzle aimed at his forehead. It was so close now he could smell the acrid fumes of cordite. Was he really going to die so stupidly—shot by a woman half crazed with jealousy?

He heard voices and footsteps. A woman's foot in a high-heeled shoe streaked into his range of vision and kicked Margaret Kimball's hand. She squealed. Her fingers relaxed. The gun skated across the rug beyond her reach.

"Alec!" It was Jean's voice. "Are you hurt?"

"No." Alec struggled to his feet. "What are you doing here?"

There were three strange men

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with Jean. Two of them lifted Margaret Kimball to her feet and snapped handcuffs on her wrists.

"You said you'd come at eight." Jean's voice was brittle. "When you didn't come I got worried. I knew the city police were under Benda's thumb, so I phoned the District Attorney, and—oh, Alec!" Tears stood in her eyes. "It seems the District Attorney suspected Aunt Margaret all along. So we came here."

One of the strangers interrupted. "It was Kimball, not Mrs. Kimball, we suspected. We knew there was a man higher up in Benda's racket—some solid citizen with political pull and no obvious underworld ties. We thought Kimball was the man but we couldn't prove it. That's why we didn't arrest Benda. We wanted Kimball, too."

"You'll never get him!" Margaret Kimball stood between two county detectives, reckless and defiant.

"We have got him," answered the District Attorney. "When I heard Miss Stacy's story I sent men to patrol the highway where it crosses the state line a few miles south of this house. I thought Kimball would try to escape that way if things got too tough for him—and he did. He talked plenty when we nabbed him. He hadn't known how Benda planned to dispose of Marie Chester. When Norton told him, it broke his nerve. When Norton explained the significance of the button fastener, Kimball realized the jig was up. He phoned a warning to Benda and made for the border in his fastest car. We caught Benda on the same road and now we're rounding up the rest of the gang."

Margaret Kimball's face worked wryly. "He warned Benda, but he left me to face all this alone—without warning—" She lifted tragic eyes to Alec. "You were right. He hates me."

Jean drew Alec out into the hall. "You've saved my brother," she said simply.

"And you saved me." He looked at her quizzically. "Didn't I say something earlier this evening about your going home and staying there—no matter what happened?"

"But I couldn't!" she retorted. "I knew you were in danger and I was afraid you'd be hurt."

"Did that make so much difference to you?"

Jean colored. Her lips were trembling but she forced them into a smile.

"What do you think?"

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BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

The original idea was that this column should award up to 5 stars; but in three and a half years I was roused to 5-star enthusiasm only twice (oddly in the same month), by Ellery Queen's THE FINISHING STROKE and Lee Blackstock's THE WOMAN IN THE WOODS (both available in 35¢ reprints: Queen Cardinal C-343, Blackstock Dell D301). You can see I don't use 5 stars lightly, and can therefore judge how highly I esteem

★★★★★ **GIDEON'S FIRE, *by J. J. Marric*** (Harper, $3.50)
The best yet in the Gideon series—which means a masterpiece of credible police work, intricate plotting, and understanding of people.

★★★★ **A TIGER WALKS, *by Ian Niall*** (Morrow, $3.75)
Something different in the way of suspense, in which the search for a mangy and murderous escaped tiger becomes more absorbing than any criminous manhunt.

★★★★ **MARNIE, *by Winston Graham*** (Doubleday, $3.95)
Strong suspense, solid novel-values in story of frigid girl who makes a career of ingenious embezzlements.

★★★★ **ARMS FOR ADONIS, *by Charlotte Jay*** (Harper, $3.50)
Admirably written adventure-intrigue tale of English girl in the thick of Lebanese politics and assassinations.

★★★ **THE INSIDIOUS DOCTOR FU-MANCHU, *by Sax Rohmer*** (Pyramid G579, 35¢)
First U.S. paperback of first (1913) Fu-Manchu book, 10 shorts disguised as a novel, which should introduce a new generation to the delights of fiction's most villainous villain.

Familiar sleuths appear in solid 3-star versions of their national manners: in America, private eye Brock Callahan in William Campbell Gault's VEIN OF VIOLENCE (Simon & Schuster, $3.50) and patrolman Mitch Taylor in Lawrence Treat's LADY, DROP DEAD (Abelard-Schuman, $2.95); from England, actor Alan Russell in Nigel FitzGerald's THE CANDLES ARE ALL OUT (Macmillan, $3.50) and Chief Inspector Henry Tibbett in Patricia Moyes' DOWN AMONG THE DEAD MEN (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, $3.50).

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Usurpation of Identity, No. 3—in the manner of Maurice Leblanc, complete with the irrepressible and irresistible Arsène Lupin (the audacious rogue of multitudinous disguises), a baffling mystery, a double dying-message, arch-adversary Inspector Ganimard—in a phrase, a faithful pastiche of an Arsène larceny, a Lupin dupe involving the most dashing and nonchalant of all fictional gentleman-cambrioleurs . . .

THE OLIVEIRA AFFAIR

by THOMAS NARCEJAC

(translated by Lawrence G. Blochman)

PARISIANS HAVE NEVER FORGOTTEN the Oliveira affair which at the time aroused great excitement and noisy public controversy. For years the mystery surrounding it remained impenetrable, and it is only now that the details of its more surprising episodes can be revealed.

Ramón Oliveira was a dark little man, petulant and talkative. He was a frequent customer of the Léthé cabaret, where he was pampered and fawned upon. He was rumored to be very rich—at least, he spent money with an open hand. He danced little, but he drank much, and the percentage-girls were always welcome at his table.

He would arrive at eleven o'clock, sit at a table near the band, order a light supper, and drink champagne. He would not leave until the small hours, very drunk, very talkative in a deep, sonorous voice, and not very steady on his feet. A luxurious Daimler awaited him, and he would disappear until the following evening.

Nobody knew where he had come from. Some said South America, others thought the Antilles. Lili and Kate tried hard to make him talk but he was very good at keeping his own business to himself. All they knew after a month of trying was that he had a ward named Incarnación, and that he was traveling in Europe to escape some obscure danger.

When he would not specify what danger, Kate made fun of him. This was a mistake, because one night he was actually attacked at the very door of the Léthé. With incredible boldness an unidentified assailant went after him with a knife and then disappeared in the maze of narrow streets around the cabaret. Oliveira would have been killed had it not been for the intervention

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of handsome Maurice de Castel-Bernac who saw what was about to happen and lunged at the would-be murderer. The knife was deflected so that it merely ripped open Oliveira's overcoat and slashed his evening jacket.

Very much upset, Oliveira thanked Castel-Bernac warmly. The latter modestly waved away all demonstration and invited Oliveira to come back into the café and have a drink at his table. The two men became friends at once. Castel-Bernac was such a poised, courteous, and gracious gentleman. He was not a regular at the Léthé. He would come in for five or six nights running, usually alone. Suddenly he would disappear and next news of him would come from the society columns of the *Figaro,* reporting that he had been among the guests at Duchess de X's garden party in London or at Baroness de Z's ball in Vienna. He traveled considerably, had had many adventures, and fought occasional duels. There was much whispering behind his back but, significantly, never to his face. All gossip stopped short when he raised his monocle and his deep brown eyes took on a cold, hard expression.

Castel-Bernac and Oliveira met often at the Léthé. They exchanged reminiscences, but not on an even basis. Castel-Bernac still clung to his reserve while Oliveira grew loquacious, talking freely of his plantations and his wealth. The name of Incarnación came up frequently in his remarks. Little by little Castel-Bernac learned that she was a blonde, nearing her majority, that she had been carefully brought up at home, and spoke French fluently. Although Oliveira was supposed to be only her legal guardian, he spoke of Incarnación with such fierce passion that Castel-Bernac wondered. When at last Oliveira showed his friend Incarnación's photograph, Castel-Bernac was dazzled by her seductive charm.

Castel-Bernac tried to learn something of the danger which was apparently hanging over Oliveira, but in vain. On such occasions Oliveira would lapse into silence, suddenly suspicious and frightened. He refused to say what he was doing in Paris—until the night someone fired a shot at him.

Oliveira and Castel-Bernac had just left the Léthé together and were talking on the sidewalk as the Daimler drove up to the curb. A detonation shattered the silence of the night. Oliveira's top hat spun off and fell to the ground. Oliveira picked up his topper, noted the bullet hole in the tall silken crown, looked about wildly but saw nobody in the deserted street, then suddenly went to pieces. Castel-Bernac barely had time to slip an arm around him and help him to the Daimler.

Once inside the car, Oliveira fainted.

Castel-Bernac gave the chauffeur

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the address of his bachelor apartment.

"Drive us to 8 Avenue de l'Observatoire, quickly," he said. "Where does my friend live?"

"The Claridge, monsieur."

"Very well. After we get to my address, you may go home. I'll drive your master to the Claridge in the morning."

Gradually, as he drank his whiskey neat, Oliveira recovered. He was still badly shaken, however, and his tanned face remained a curious gray. Castel-Bernac went to great pains to make him comfortable.

"You may stay here and rest as long as you like," said the host. "I will have my man prepare your bed."

Oliveira declined the invitation. He was afraid that Rudolph, his secretary to whom he was greatly attached, would worry about him. He insisted so much that Castel-Bernac called Antoine, his own chauffeur, to get out the Delahaye, and insisted in turn on accompanying his friend to the safety of the Claridge.

As the powerful car sped along the empty, silent avenues, a grateful and disturbed Oliveira told Castel-Bernac his story. He was being pursued, he said, by the gang of The Coyote, a dangerous bandit who had once tried to kidnap him for ransom in Rio de Janeiro. He had fled to Europe, and was living in Paris temporarily until the arrival of Incarnación who was due the following month to celebrate her twenty-first birthday. Oliveira was giving her a fabulous pearl necklace as a birthday present. Although Castel-Bernac was not easily impressed, he was obviously startled when his friend mentioned the price of the necklace.

By the time they reached the Claridge, Oliveira had regained his loquacious gaiety. Rudolph was obviously anxious and nervous as he thanked Castel-Bernac, who liked him at once. The secretary seemed definitely older than Oliveira. Tall, thin, with alert gray eyes, he bustled about his employer like a mother hen.

"He's worth two Antoines," Castel-Bernac said to himself as he got back into his car.

The next evening, as Castel-Bernac was finishing his supper at the Léthé, Rudolph made an unexpected entrance. Hurrying to Castel-Bernac's table, he bent over to whisper: "Monsieur Oliveira would like to see you immediately, Monsieur. He's not well and seems quite upset."

"Very well. I'll follow you."

The waiters, the maître d'hôtel, and Kate all told the newspaper reporters later that Castel-Bernac wore a worried expression when he left the Léthé.

The two men got into the Daimler.

A few hours later the storm broke.

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The afternoon papers were on the street by mid-morning with extra editions. The headlines screamed: *Mystery Killing at Hotel Claridge . . . Brazilian Millionaire Murdered . . . Police Baffled . . .*

Parisians snatched papers from the hands of the newsboys and besieged the news kiosks to read about the mystery. The story in *Paris-Informations* was a typical report:

"A double crime has thrown the Hotel Claridge into a state of unusual confusion.

"At eight o'clock this morning a phone call came to the fashionable Champs-Elysées hostelry for M. Oliveira. When the operator rang the rich Brazilian's suite and got no response, a *chasseur* was sent to arouse M. Oliveira's private secretary. The boy found the doors locked and got no answer to his repeating knocking. He reported to the office that he thought he heard a muffled groan behind the closed doors, and the management immediately summoned the police.

"Detectives entering the millionaire's suite found a dreadful scene. M. Oliveira was lying in a pool of blood, dying of stab wounds. Viscount Maurice de Castel-Bernac, the well-known young clubman, was lying unconscious nearby. The viscount had been badly beaten about the head.

"Rudolph Binger, M. Oliveira's private secretary, was lying on the floor of his own room, tightly bound and gagged. The secretary's first statements cast little light upon the mystery. M. Oliveira had not been feeling well the night before, he said, and sent him to the Léthé night club for M. de Castel-Bernac, with whom he had become very friendly. Rudolph Binger brought the Viscount to the Hotel and left him alone with M. Oliveira, while the secretary returned to another room where he was working. He had heard no suspicious noises during the next few hours, he said.

"A little after half-past one in the morning, he said, his employer —at least, he had assumed it was his employer—rang for him. As he stepped into the study where the two men were talking, he was knocked down from behind, bound and gagged, and dragged into his own room. He struggled to free himself, and had managed to loosen some of the ropes when he lost consciousness. He could not describe his attacker except to say that it was a large, muscular man.

"M. Oliveira died before the arrival of an ambulance summoned by the police. Viscount de Castel-Bernac is still in a coma, but doctors believe he will survive.

"The well-known and popular detective, Inspector Ganimard, in charge of the investigation, told reporters he believed that robbery was the motive for the crime."

Noon editions of the newspapers hinted that the Oliveira murder case was about to take a dramatic

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turn, and crowds of Parisians haunted the kiosks on the Boulevards, awaiting developments. They came with the late afternoon papers—and they were indeed sensational.

Arsène Lupin Arrested, screamed the headlines; *Was Posing as Castel-Bernac. Did He Kill Oliveira?*

That was the question that bothered Inspector Ganimard: Did Arsène Lupin kill Oliveira?

"See here, my dear Ganimard," said M. Formerie, the Examining Magistrate assigned to the case. "Are you sure of what you are saying? Did Oliveira actually murmur before dying, 'Maurice . . . Garance Lake'?"

"I'm positive. He said it three times. Even the doctor heard it. And of course 'Maurice' can only be Maurice de Castel-Bernac. The scene is easy to re-enact. The two men quarreled, Lupin stabbed Oliveira, and Oliveira struck Lupin with the bronze candlestick we found on the rug. This theory, however, would involve the presence of an accomplice. Who rang for the secretary? Who tied up Rudolph Binger? And finally, who ransacked the study?"

"The money has not been found?"

"That's another mystery. Oliveira has been liquidating a large part of his fortune. Within the last month he has cashed drafts on the Bank of the Netherlands for a total of more than ten million gold francs. We've been unable to put our hands on any of this money. I've gone through the apartment twenty times, down to the most obscure corner. Nothing. The money has simply disappeared."

"Have you searched Lupin's bachelor hideout in the Avenue de l'Observatoire?"

"Naturally. We found nothing there. The chauffeur has disappeared with Lupin's car, but we'll pick him up soon. It's hard to conceal a Delahaye."

"Can't we assume that both Lupin and Oliveira were attacked by the mysterious enemies who have been pursuing the Brazilian?"

"It's a possibility, of course. But the more I dig into this thing, the more I see Lupin at the bottom of the whole tricky business. Don't the words 'Garance Lake' pronounced by the dying man indicate that Lupin might very well be the head of an international gang that has headquarters at this Lake? And in view of what's happened, don't the two attempts on Oliveira's life in the immediate vicinity of the Léthé seem suspicious to you? Oliveira is afraid of something and within a short time he is stabbed in the overcoat and shot through his silk hat. And who is the sole witness to each attack? Lupin in person. Curious coincidence, don't you think?"

"I agree. But coincidences do turn up, and not always in fiction."

"Never when Arsène Lupin is concerned, Monsieur le Juge. Let's

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look at the record. When Duchess Anthor lost her jewels, Lupin—or Castel-Bernac, if you prefer—was among the guests. When burglars broke into the Riviera villa of Prince Caraccioli, who was his constant companion? Again Castel-Bernac. No, believe me, Monsieur le Juge, he's the culprit."

"How is he, by the way?"

"Lupin? To tell the truth, not terribly well. He seems to be delirious. He talks incoherently. The blow on the head could have affected him mentally."

"The devil! This is not going to make our job any easier. What does he seem to talk about?"

"Nothing that makes sense. He's always talking about a drawer and a key. And over and over again he repeats the name of Incarnación."

"Let's pay a visit to him."

Castel-Bernac was lying on a narrow cot. He seemed to be dozing. As Ganimard and the Examining Magistrate approached, he started and groaned, lifting his hand to his bandage-swathed head. His unfocused eyes stared at Ganimard. Then he smiled and said, "Incarnación, you will be rich, very rich."

Suddenly he sat up and screamed. His eyes, now feverish, focused on some distant point, far beyond his cell, beyond the prison.

"Robber!" he yelled. "Thief! Swindler! So you thought you hid the key to the drawer, did you? Well I've got it and it's mine. Mine!"

He laughed insanely as the keeper forced him to lie down again. Then Castel-Bernac turned his face to the wall and began to cry softly.

"Horrible!" said the Examining Magistrate. As the two men stepped into the corridor, he added, "Suppose it's not Lupin?"

"Not Lupin? Ah, no, Monsieur le Juge, don't say such a thing." Ganimard blanched. "I know Lupin and I'm certain this is the man. True, we don't have his prints or his anthropometric measurements, but I know his features so well that I'm sure this is Lupin."

The prison resembled a besieged fortress. The guards were doubled. All journalists were strictly excluded but the tone of the press grew more excited daily. The investigation dragged. *Paris-Informations* editorials attacked the police and held Inspector Ganimard up to ridicule.

The Inspector concealed the fact that Arsène Lupin had gone mad. He stubbornly denied all rumors. He feared the reactions of Parisians who had always been in sympathy with Lupin and would surely accuse the police of having driven their Public Hero Number One insane with their third-degree methods. And Ganimard, perplexed, returned again and again to the cell where Castel-Bernac still laughed and cried and repeated the same incoherent phrases over and over.

"See here, Lupin, you hear me, don't you? Now listen: Oliveira attacked you, didn't he? Yes, he at-

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tacked you . . . Answer me, *sacre-bleu!* I know you're shamming, but you may as well stop acting. You can't make a monkey out of an old bull like me . . ."

And Castel-Bernac went on with his low-pitched monotone: "The key . . . the drawer . . . I've got it now—I've got it!"

Each time Ganimard left the prison he was a wreck, exhausted, and tortured by doubt. Between visits he was still convinced that the man was Lupin, but the prisoner had changed so much that it was easy to become uncertain while listening to his ravings. The prisoner had lost much weight; his cheeks were sunken and his nose seemed longer. Fleeting expressions still marked the man as Lupin but an instant later his features seemed to change, and as Ganimard watched the head tossing pitifully on the pillow, his doubts grew . . . And yet Castel-Bernac's wound had healed completely. Why, then—?

Ganimard returned to the Hotel Claridge to start all over again.

There were plenty of keys and drawers in the murder apartment, but the keys were all honest keys and there was nothing mysterious about any of the drawers. None contained a false bottom or secret compartment.

Ganimard himself was going mad. He sent for Rudolph Binger who from the beginning had done all he could to help the police.

Poor Binger was sure he was being watched and didn't dare go out. He had shut himself up in his room, either reading or painting water colors. And he was apprehensive about the arrival of Incarnación who, informed of her guardian's death, was due in Bordeaux in two days aboard the *Rio de le Plata.*

The mystery remained as deep as ever. The Delahaye was still missing, as was Lupin's chauffeur, Antoine. Examining Magistrate Formerie began to lose patience. *Paris-Informations* published a cartoon captioned *The Hare and the Tortoise.* The hare's profile bore a striking resemblance to unhappy Ganimard, while the tortoise's smile was unmistakably that of Arsène Lupin.

This was the last straw. Examining Magistrate Formerie summoned Ganimard to his chambers. The interview proved a stormy one.

"We must release him," insisted the magistrate. "We don't have enough evidence against him to hold him for the Court of Assizes."

"How can you think of such a thing!" Ganimard protested hotly.

Finally Ganimard came up with an idea, the only idea which might get them out of their dilemma. And even he made the proposition with some hesitancy.

"Monsieur le Juge, let us re-enact the crime. Rudolph will play Oliveira and Lupin, finding himself in the same situation and surroundings as on the night of the tragedy may regain his sanity."

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It was a tempting suggestion, although the execution might prove difficult. However, there was no time to lose.

"Very well, proceed," said the magistrate.

Preparations were made in complete secrecy. In order not to attract public attention, the Black Maria would not be used. When Castel-Bernac, thin and pale, reached the sidewalk outside the prison, a Daimler awaited him. He got in without a word and Ganimard followed to sit beside him. Behind the Daimler was a big Renault crowded with armed policemen in plain clothes.

The two cars reached the Claridge without incident. Night was closing in. When Castel-Bernac was nudge into the suite, Rudolph was stretched out on a divan, resting. Ganimard joined Formerie who had preceded him and the two men retired to a corner. All doors were guarded by the police.

Castel-Bernac sat down, obviously surprised. His eyes roved about the room, without focusing. He had aged and seemed very tired. Rudolph spoke to him, but he did not answer. He did not appear to be listening. He sat quietly, clasping and unclasping his hands automatically.

Once Ganimard saw a gleam of hope when Castel-Bernac reached out his hand toward a mahogany desk, but the gesture was not completed. Castel-Bernac resumed his pose of dejection and resignation.

"Nom d'une pipe!" Ganimard mumbled between his teeth and signaled to Rudolph.

Rudolph got up, grasped a heavy bronze candlestick, and lifting it threateningly, advanced toward Castel-Bernac. Then came the shock Ganimard had been counting on. The Viscount sprang to his feet and rushed at his adversary. Rudolph fell to the floor as he had been instructed, but Castel-Bernac, instead of being calmed by his apparent victory, grew more and more excited. His eyes bulged. He shot out his fist. His voice shrill with rage, he shouted the words that so often came to his lips: "Robber! Thief! Swindler! So you thought you hid the key to the drawer, did you? Well, I've got it and it's mine. Mine!"

Suddenly he whirled and rushed to the desk, pulling out drawers, and searching them with feverish fingers. Ganimard and the magistrate approached on tiptoe as Castel-Bernac opened boxes, rummaged in cartons, and scattered papers, muttering all the while in a muffled voice: "I've got it, I've got it."

Then Castel-Bernac stopped abruptly and sighed. His glance surveyed the pile of letters, bills, and cardboard boxes that littered the desk before him. He picked up a blank sheet of paper, folded it carefully in four, and stuffed it into an old envelope that had been lying

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on top of the desk. He held out the envelope to Ganimard.

"Have this delivered at once," he said. Then he changed his mind. "No, give it back."

Ganimard obeyed with a shrug.

There was a groan from the floor. Rudolph, tired of playing dead, was squirming into a fresh posture. Ganimard silenced him with a wave of of the hand. Castel-Bernac had just picked up the telephone.

"Give me Grenelle 00-44."

Ganimard and the magistrate were all ears.

"Hello . . . Hello . . . The carrots are cooked." He hung up, yawned, then called, "Antoine."

A policeman came to the door.

"Breakfast at nine," said Castel-Bernac. Then he stretched out on the divan and closed his eyes. Ganimard and the magistrate looked at each other in consternation.

"He's crazy, all right," Ganimard sighed, and roughly ordered Rudolph to get up from the floor and leave. The Inspector was both furious and mortified.

"So what do we do next?" asked the magistrate.

"What is there to do? I'll take him back." Ganimard shook Castel-Bernac who stood up and followed him docilely to the Daimler.

The experiment had failed. The two cars drove back toward Santé prison.

Ganimard was scarcely aware of the prisoner beside him. He was watching the pattern of early evening traffic, the flashing of electric signs, the slow dark flow of the Paris crowds. The auto progressed slowly, apparently rocking the prisoner to sleep.

Ganimard was thinking, trying to make sense of the scene at the Claridge, when a burst of young, fresh, almost insolent laughter exploded almost in his ear. A shiver ran down his spine. *Mon Dieu!* He knew that laugh! And he knew the voice, that mocking, sarcastic voice. And when Castel-Bernac ripped off the bandage that still hid his forehead, there was no further doubt—the burning eyes, the chin, especially the jeering, playful expression.

"Nom d'une pipe!" exclaimed Ganimard. "Arsène Lupin!"

"Yes, my good Ganimard, and how did you like my little spell of madness? Well acted, wasn't it? You lock up poor Lupin. You watch him day and night. Then one fine evening you unlock him, let him out of his cell for the simple reason that Ganimard doesn't know what's going on. Ganimard gives Lupin the keys to the city. He ought to get the Prix de Rome for such a work of imagination, don't you think?"

"Scum!" said Ganimard.

"Now don't get angry. After all, I had to go through the painful process of arrest and incarceration in order to be able to search Oliveira's study without being disturbed."

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"You what?" Ganimard started.

"Stop jiggling. You make me seasick." And Lupin, imitating the voice he used as a maniac, said, "Robber! Thief! Swindler! So you thought you hid the key to the drawer, did you? Well, I've got it and it's mine. Mine!"

He laughed until the tears rolled down his cheeks.

"I had both of you fooled, didn't I? You examined me with a stethoscope and microscope. Is it really he? Is it or isn't it? Yes or no? Perhaps or maybe? You don't know how hard it was for me to keep from laughing."

"Scum!"

"Again? Please try to be polite." His eyes sparkled audaciously as he looked at Ganimard. "Now listen well, Ganimard: the carrots are cooked."

"What does that mean—the carrots are cooked?"

"That means that in five minutes dear old Lupin will be free—and wealthy."

A wave of anger surged up inside Ganimard. He lunged at Arsène Lupin—but there was no struggle. Ganimard fell back, gasping for breath, while Lupin pocketed the Inspector's pistol.

"Were you going to be a bad boy? Did you want to hurt poor old Lupin? But Lupin knows a few things that the police never learn. How did you like that jab to the solar plexus?"

Ganimard, his mouth wide open, was still gasping for breath. The auto had crossed the Seine and was heading toward the Santé Prison. The chauffeur had not even turned his head. Suddenly Arsène Lupin changed his tone.

"Listen, Ganimard, and try to understand. You must know that I didn't kill that poor imbecile Oliveira. I was blackjacked from behind by a charming fellow whom I know and who will soon have to settle with me. It was he who killed Oliveira and falsified the scene of the crime. Very neat, that candlestick business. A few centimeters more and I would have had it. *Saperlotte!* What a blow to the skull! I was just coming to when you arrived. So I played dead while waiting for the chance to play the madman. You thought I was out cold, didn't you? Very convenient—it gave me time for reflection.

"Maurice . . . What does that mean—Maurice? Well, you know that Oliveira had liquidated his fortune. I knew it, too—I have my own sources. I heard you searching Oliveira's suite, and that saved me much time and trouble. If the money was not there, where could it be, eh, Ganimard?"

Ganimard was so anxious to learn the solution to the enigma that he forgot for a moment that he was practically a prisoner of Arsène Lupin.

"Where?" he asked meekly.

"The answer is so clear that you must be blind not to see it. Oliveira

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must have bought something of very small dimensions but of very great value—a jewel, perhaps, or maybe—I saw the connection immediately. From that point on my plan was simple. The police would place seals on the suite and set a watch on the Claridge. Impossible for me, therefore, to get back into Oliveira's study. What would you have done in my place?"

Ganimard mumbled something unintelligible but probably rude. Lupin's taunting laughter again rang out.

"Ganimard, you are a dolt, a blockhead, a mooncalf. All I had to do was to get myself arrested, simulate madness, and instigate a reenactment of the crime. The police need Lupin. Lupin is the only witness to the murder. So Ganimard, with motherly care, takes Lupin to Oliveira's study and turns him loose."

Ganimard clenched his fists.

"So Lupin quietly conducts his search under the very nose of his guardian angel. He immediately lays hands on the thing he is looking for. The business of the key and the drawer was of course just window dressing—to lead you on, my dear accomplice. But this, my friend, is more to the point."

Lupin drew from his pocket the old envelope he had given to Ganimard in Oliveira's study and then taken back.

"You had millions in your hand, Ganimard."

The Inspector roared with anger.

"Control yuorself, Ganimard. It's not your fault that you were born without the power of intelligent observation. See this envelope? And the two postage stamps on it? Don't you recognize them? Maurice! Mauritius, the English call it. But since it was French until we ceded it to Britain in 1814, we French still call the island 'Maurice.' The two stamps are copies of the first postage stamps issued by the island—the Queen Victoria issue of 1847—and what beauties they are! In absolutely superb condition, with extra-wide margins—what the dealers on the stamp bourse would call mint. Their value? Fabulous, my dear Ganimard, almost priceless—who can say how much a fanatical collector would pay for two such brilliant and immaculate copies? Where Oliveira obtained them, I don't know. He hid them in the most natural place in the world—on an old envelope lying on the desk where any body and everybody could see it. Injured? Oh, no, the two stamps are stickered on very lightly and very, very carefully. And there they were, Ganimard, my pet, in front of your eyes all the time, staring you in the face. Why, the dying message told you what to look for —'Maurice'—'Mauritius.' So simple, so neat, eh?"

"Give me that envelope, you pirate!"

"Watch your language, Gani-

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mard. Is that the way to thank good old Lupin who takes the trouble to explain everything so clearly to you?"

"Then keep on explaining. What does 'Garance Lake' mean?"

"Ah, that is something I will explain later. What about tomorrow evening? I'll see you in the railway station at Poitiers, let's say. It's not far—less than two hundred miles."

Ganimard was not happy with Lupin's mockery. He took refuge in sullen silence. Lupin looked about him.

"Well, Ganimard, I must say good night now."

"Don't, I warn you. If you make the slightest move, I'll shout. There are six armed men following us. You'll be shot down like a dog."

"Idiot! What about my phone call? 'The carrots are cooked.' A prearranged signal, Ganimard, to alert a few friends who must be in the immediate vicinity at this very moment."

As though on cue from Lupin, two cars crashed into each other almost in front of the Daimler. There were cries, the shrill sounds of a police whistle. For an instant Ganimard turned his head in the direction of the accident. In that instant Arsène Lupin was in the street, gun barrel, aimed at Ganimard. Recklessly the Inspector jumped out after him—too late. A passing Delahaye snatched up Lupin on the fly and disappeared into the night.

The Delahaye devoured the miles. Its headlights seemed to suck up the nocturnal landscape which roared toward them, then vanished behind.

"Faster," said Lupin.

Antoine pressed down the accelerator. The speedometer needle climbed. "We're going to get killed, chief," he said.

"You, maybe. But I'll get there."

Silence.

"You were a fool to phone the Claridge," Lupin said.

"I was worried, Chief."

The long straight highway across the plains of the Beauce gave way to winding roads. The tires screamed on the turns and gravel from the shoulders machine-gunned the fenders.

"Don't slow up, *sacrebleu!*"

"We're coming to Bonneval, chief. We'll be through it in a second."

They went through Bonneval at racing speed. Other sleeping towns followed—Châteaudun . . . Cloyes . . . Fontaine . . . The motor hummed a high musical note. The needle climbed higher and higher.

"I hope we don't run into a cyclist," said Antoine.

But the road stretching out in the silvery beams of the headlights was deserted. At the right a red light gleamed, growing steadily larger.

"There it is," said Lupin.

It was the Bordeaux Express, the train that leaves Paris at 11:15 p.m.

The Delahaye leaped ahead. The

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car was now racing alongside the train. Arsène Lupin watched the locomotive fall slowly behind despite the furious pumping of the connecting rods. Antoine said, "We'll be twenty minutes ahead of him at Tours, Chief."

The Paris-Bordeaux Express was almost empty. The little old man with the glasses who walked through the corridors of the first-class cars had his choice of compartments. He stopped before a lighted compartment in which a single passenger was dozing. The train rolled on toward Poitiers, leaving behind the winking lights of Saint-Pierre-des-Corps, a suburb of Tours. The clack-clack of the rail joints increased in rhythm.

The little old man sat down opposite his fellow traveler who seemed to be an artist, judging from his pointed beard and flowing tie. Furthermore, the flat box beside him on which he rested an elbow was obviously the sort of case in which artists carried their paints.

"Pardon me, Monsieur, but do you know at what time we are due in Bordeaux?"

The painter opened his eyes, grumbled something unintelligible, and closed his eyes again. The little old man did not insist. He took a newspaper from his pocket and unfolded it ostentatiously. A large headline crossed the front page: *Arsène Lupin Escapes!* The little old man started reading in a low voice, as though half to himself.

"Before he fled, Arsène Lupin made important disclosures to the police. He insisted that he had not killed Oliveira and gave the police officer a detailed description of the actual murderer . . ."

The passenger opened his eyes and leaned forward, suddenly interested.

"Did you say the murderer is known?"

"Not yet," said the little old man. "But he won't be hard to identify."

"I haven't been following this case very closely," said his fellow passenger. "but it seems to me that if Arsène Lupin is innocent, it must be his chauffeur who killed the Brazilian. Have they caught him yet? What's his name? Antoine?"

"I don't agree with you," said the little old man. "If Antoine had knocked out his master, he would not have helped him escape later would he? And yet it was certainly Antoine who drove the car in which Arsène Lupin made his getaway."

"Do you think so?"

"No doubt about it."

The little old man spoke with such conviction that the artist did not even try to argue. He said, "Then how would you explain the crime?"

"This theory is entirely my own, please understand, but I think you will admit that it is logical. Oliveira, you know, had liquidated all

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his assets. Why? His ward, the lovely Incarnación, was about to achieve her majority. Let's see if we can't connect these two facts. When a minor reaches the age of twenty-one, she has a right to come into her own money, and to ask her guardian for an accounting. I think you are beginning to understand . . ."

The painter was certainly greatly interested in what the little old man had to say.

"Let's suppose that Oliveira was not over-anxious to render an account of his stewardship. He creates the impression at home that he has been threatened, and he leaves for Europe. Here he sells his securities and plans to disappear."

"Then how would you explain the two attempts on his life outside the Léthé cabaret?"

The little old man laughed. "I'm glad you asked that question," he said. "I was expecting it. May I ask how you knew that Oliveira was attacked outside the Léthé? The newspapers didn't print a word about either of those attacks. Only one man beside Oliveira knew about them—Rudolph Binger. So take off your beard now, my dear Rudolph."

Rudolph Binger was staggered. He obeyed instinctively. "H-how do you know all these d-details?" he stammered.

"You mean about those two murder attempts? Why, I staged them, Rudolph."

"Then you're . . . you're . . ."

"Say it, Rudolph. It has taken you a long time. Arsène Lupin."

The little old man stood up and straightened his stooped shoulders. He was no longer little or old. He towered over the pseudo-artist.

"Don't you understand, Rudolph, that I was out to win your employer's confidence? I wanted to know what sort of skulduggery he was up to. I had to get his trust one way or another, and I chose the other . . . And now perhaps you could tell me who knocked me out with the candlestick. Could it have been, by any chance, a man named Rudolph Binger?"

Binger paled, but he was quick with his denial. "Why, I was bound and gagged on the floor of my room. How could I have—?"

"Bound? But not too tightly, were you? Yes, I know, you said you struggled to free yourself and good old Ganimard swallowed your story hook, line, and sinker. I was there, too—remember? I was on the floor, too, and I heard everything. It's easy enough to entangle yourself in a length of rope, but I'm not fooled by those old tricks. A man can learn a lot, just lying on the floor. You did quite well, didn't you, lying there while I spirited away the two magnificent Mauritius stamps, right under your nose? And you didn't even crack a smile."

Binger clamped his jaws shut. His forehead was beaded with sweat. He said nothing.

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"You were after the stamps, too, weren't you? But you collect pearls as well as stamps, don't you? What did you do with the pearls?" Lupin demanded.

Rudolph Binger started. "Why, I don't know . . . I have no idea what you're talking about. I never saw any pearls."

"The pearl necklace your employer was going to give to his ward for her twenty-first birthday? Don't tell me you don't know where it is?"

"I swear to you!"

"Liar. What do you take me for? The pearls are right here in your luggage."

"You won't find them."

"Now, baby. I know you're not wearing the necklace under your shirt with a religious medal hanging from it. But a necklace can be broken up and the pearls hidden individually. Where? Well, why is Monsieur Rudolph Binger disguised as an artist? Obviously so that he can carry his paint box with him without attracting undue attention."

Binger reached for his paint box.

"Don't bother," Lupin said. "I know all the answers. 'Maurice . . . Garance Lake . . .' Well, we know that 'Maurice' means Mauritius. And I imagine that Garance Lake refers to the color of a tube of oil paint. A red pigment, isn't it, Garance Lake? Very clever of Oliveira to have hidden the pearls in tubes of paint. The biggest pearls, the most valuable, must be in the tube of Garance Lake? Right?"

Binger's crestfallen expression was an eloquent answer.

"What are you going to do to me?" he muttered. "I swear I didn't kill Oliveira."

"You stupid brigand!" said Arsène Lupin. "Of course you didn't kill Oliveira. And you and I both know why."

Lupin barely had time to duck. The steel blade glittered as it whistled past his head and struck the panel behind him. The dagger was still quivering, its point deeply imbedded in the wood, as Lupin lunged.

The two men grappled and went down between the seats. They rolled on the floor, fighting savagely. They were not aware of the train passing through Chatellerault, the wheels clacking over switch points, the station walls giving back the roar of the speeding express. Lights flash and vanished. Still the men wrestled. Arsène Lupin realized he was up against a skilled, stubborn adversary. He would have to use all his tricks.

A gurgling sound arose from the floor. Lupin, still kneeling, wiped his face with a handkerchief.

"Well, my lad," said Lupin. "I see you are not aware of the thumb-to-carotid manoeuver. I thought every child knew—"

Lupin stopped. His adversary was not listening; the man was out cold.

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Then Arsène Lupin got to work . . .

Ganimard nervously paced the platform of the Poitiers railway station. He had posted plainclothesmen all over the place; but one could never take too many precautions when dealing with that devil Lupin. Ganimard had come to Poitiers because of a telegram he had received a few hours earlier. He read it again, at once angry and uneasy.

REQUEST GANIMARD TAKE DELIVERY CULPRIT POITIERS RAILWAY STATION FIVE TWENTY-FIVE SHARP.

CASTEL-BERNAC

Ganimard had come down on the off chance that he might be able to make up for his setback of the previous evening. Lupin would not get away from him this time. He had to be taught that nobody could make a fool of old Ganimard with impunity. The cocky *cambrioleur* had won the first round, but Ganimard would have the last word.

The Bordeaux Express chuffed into the station to interrupt his soliloquy. Ganimard watched the doors, the lighted windows. A few passengers were getting off—but not Lupin. The Inspector was about to board the train and explore every car when he saw the conductor running toward him.

"Hurry, Monsieur, hurry! There's a passenger unconscious in first-class. He's been bound and gagged. Some criminal's work."

"Nom d'une pipe!" exclaimed Ganimard. And he followed the conductor quickly.

There was indeed a passenger unconscious in a first-class carriage —Rudolph Binger! A letter was pinned to one of his lapels. The envelope bore the simple inscription: "By hand—no postage stamp required."

Ganimard gritted his teeth. Suddenly an idea struck him. Why had the conductor come to him? Nobody knew he was in Poitiers. The Inspector leaped from the train.

"Martin," he called. "Take two men and arrest the conductor."

The detective stared in astonishment. Ganimard, choking with anger, shouted, "The conductor is Arsène Lupin!"

An hour later they were still looking for the phantom conductor.

"At least," thought Ganimard as he gave orders to continue the search, "I've got Rudolph Binger."

And he tore open Lupin's letter.

"My dear Ganimard:

"Forgive me for not explaining the Oliveira affair to you in person, but duty is duty, and I must board No. 147 returning to Paris. A conductor's job is no joke.

"And speaking of jokes, I am leaving a bad one with you—one of the worst. The sorry individual I am delivering to you—neatly tied, I hope—is a swindler, an imposter, a murderer of at least one person and a potential murderer of another. He is, in fact, almost anything you want to call him."

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"This man who will tell you he is Rudolph Binger will also tell you that he did not kill Oliveira, and in this you must believe him. He could not possibly have killed Oliveira. He *is* Oliveira.

"It was Binger—the real Binger—who drank champagne with me nearly every night at the Léthé, posing as Oliveira at his master's behest. Oliveira wanted to attract attention to Binger in his spurious role, then when his false identity had been thoroughly established, kill him and disappear with the fortune he had stolen from his ward. With everyone convinced that Binger was Oliveira, Oliveira planned to start a new life under a new name and peacefully enjoy the millions he had filched from Incarnación.

"You remember how Oliveira lured me to his apartment and how he threw suspicion on a poor young man who wouldn't hurt a fly. But Oliveira made one mistake. He did not suspect that the real Binger was in love with Incarnación, that the real Binger was keeping close watch on him and knew all about the rare stamps and the magnificent pearl necklace. Binger's dying message was an accusation of Oliveira as well as clues to the hiding places of the fortune.

"I consider myself the executor of Binger's last will and testament. I have avenged him. Thus my conscience and yours, my dear Ganimard, will be at rest.

"To life, to death.

"ARSENE LUPIN"

A month later the following paragraph appeared in the social columns of *Le Figaro*:

"We have just learned of the marriage of Mlle. Incarnación de Cepedé to the Viscount Maurice de Castel-Bernac. It is recalled that only a few weeks ago the Viscount was the victim of an unfortunate misunderstanding. Mistaken for Arsène Lupin, he was arrested and escaped under the most romantic circumstances. He had no difficulty, of course, in establishing his innocence. Our best wishes go to the young bridal couple."

NEXT MONTH . . .

MICHAEL GILBERT's *London Manhunt*

and "something special"—

EMILY NEFF's *The Love Sportsman*

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **VICTOR CANNING**

TITLE: ***Everything of the Finest***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Inspector Marron

LOCALE: England

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *In certain lines of work one learns to observe. Detective, for example. And butler. Indeed, Inspector Marron thought the butler should have been a detective!*

ALL THE lights were on in the conservatory. The air was hot and humid. A small flock of tropical finches twittered and flitted restlessly among the higher branches of the great vine, and a couple of scarlet cardinals flew up from the drinking fountain set in a rookery in the corner. A blue and yellow macaw looked sardonically down from the crest of a palm at the old man lying dead on the floor. Outside the snow fell thickly.

James Ditton, tall, suave, plump-jowled butler to the dead man, stood respectfully facing the dead man's family. He held a revolver steadily in his right hand.

Close to Herbert Coddington, the elder of the two middle-aged brothers, sat Alice Symes, a red and white silk dressing gown pulled closely around her, her fair hair a little untidy but attractive. She had one hand in Herbert's, and there was a look of defiance on her pretty face. Matthew Coddington, the other brother, smoked a cigar and stared at the floor. A few feet from him it was littered with the remains of a decanter and broken pieces of glass.

Herbert Coddington shifted uneasily and began to say something, but Ditton quickly interrupted him with a movement of the revolver.

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"If you please, Mr. Herbert, except for what I have already said, it will be better to have no discussion of this matter until the police arrive. I trust that you will all pardon the liberty I have taken—but in the circumstances it appears to be necessary."

And so they waited until half an hour later when, at midnight, the police party arrived—a police doctor, a police constable, and Detective-Inspector Marron, a middle-aged, bulky, red-faced man, more like a farmer than a policeman, with a blunt, direct manner.

After a few preliminary inquiries the Inspector left the doctor and the constable with the family and told Ditton that he would like to talk to him alone. He took Ditton into the study and sitting down at the desk said, "Well, Ditton, let's hear about it."

Ditton, suppressing a frown at the sight of the man sitting at his master's desk, said, "Every evening before retiring, the master was in the habit of going into the conservatory to sit for a while among his plants and birds."

"Make a bit of a mess, don't they? Flying around like that?"

"The master took great pleasure in them. He liked beautiful things. His birds, his china, and his paintings. At a quarter to eleven I always brought him his whiskey."

"From all I hear he was a stingy sort of bird himself."

"He had very definite views, sir. Being careful with his money in order to spend it wisely was one. As you can see—" he waved his hand round the room "—everything in this house is of the finest. Only the best would do. It was a pleasure to work here."

"Yes, yes. Get on with it," said Marron brusquely.

Ditton winced a little. "As I took the master in his whiskey, I heard him talking angrily to someone at the far end of the conservatory. He was hidden from me by the big palm. Then I heard him shout. There was the sound of a heavy blow, and the lights went out. There is a master switch at that end of the conservatory. Someone came running toward me in the darkness and I—" he shook his head sadly, "—I dropped the tray I was carrying. I grappled with the person but after a few moments he escaped me and disappeared into the house."

"I see. And then you roused everyone in the house and brought them down to the conservatory. You can give me that." He nodded at the revolver which Ditton still held. Ditton handed it over.

"That is correct, sir. Cook is away for the night, but I summoned Mr. Herbert."

"He's the bald-headed one?"

"He is. And Mr. Matthew and Miss Symes, the master's secretary."

"And you kept them here, without saying a word to them?"

"That is correct, sir."

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"Why? Didn't you search the house for the murderer? Have a look around outside? Footprints in the snow?"

"It was not necessary, sir."

"Why not?"

"Because in my opinion, sir, one of the master's sons is the murderer."

Inspector Marron eyed Ditton shrewdly.

"Well, go on—give me the dirt."

"Sir?"

Marron smiled. "Unburden yourself, Ditton. This is a murder case. The old man's neck was broken by a strong and expert blow. Somebody knew exactly what he was doing."

"The master was very frail, sir. I would like to point out that I have already given Mr. Herbert—as heir—my immediate notice. Otherwise I would be considerably embarrassed in speaking this way."

"Yes, yes. But get on with it. Which of the two sons had a motive for murder?"

"They both had, sir. Mr. Matthew—"

"That's the fair-haired one?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Matthew and Mr. Herbert have both been kept very short of money. The master was very dominating. It seemed hard for him to realize that they were no longer boys, but middle-aged men and he was convinced that they were both improvident."

"Are they?"

"No, sir. They have all their father's careful instincts. But they both wanted their freedom. And there has been trouble about Miss Symes, of course."

"What kind of woman is she?"

"In her flighty way she is adequate. Mr. Herbert wanted to—"

"Wanted to what?"

"Marry her, sir. He was quite frank about it with the master and there was a terrible scene. Miss Symes was given notice two days ago."

"So, if your master were out of the way, Mr. Herbert would get his share of the inheritance and be free to marry her?"

"Yes, sir."

"And Mr. Matthew?"

"I understand—that is to say, I have gathered in the course of my duties—that he had long been trying to persuade the master to buy him a farm."

"I see. And now, let's hear about you, Ditton."

"Me, sir?"

"Yes." Marron smiled. "In my profession, Ditton, nothing must be overlooked. Does Mr. Coddington's death benefit you or any others?"

"Yes, sir. He told me that cook and myself would get two thousand pounds each. And since he knew this house and its contents would be sold at his death, all the china and glassware would come to us."

"Us?"

"Cook is my wife, sir. It is our

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ambition to operate a small hotel."

"But the brothers stood to get much more?"

"The master, I understand, was a very wealthy man."

"And you think one of them did it. Why?"

"Well, Inspector, just for a moment in the conservatory before the lights went out I caught a glimpse of the man talking to the master. I noticed clearly his fair hair. Both the brothers look very much alike, but Mr. Herbert is very plainly bald."

"So it was Mr. Matthew, eh? Well, all that seems simple enough."

Ditton shook his head.

"Why not?"

"Well, sir, I told you that as the man ran out I grappled with him. Afterwards when I had put the light on and seen that there was nothing I could do for the master, I found this on the floor, close to the spot where I had struggled with the murderer." Ditton took something from his pocket and put it on the desk.

Marron gave a little whistle.

"A wig?"

"Yes, sir."

"A fair-haired wig. So the murderer, in case he should be seen, wanted to look like Mr. Matthew?"

"That's how it would seem, sir."

"Of course it is. Mr. Herbert puts on a wig. He looks like his brother. It was a bit of bad luck that you came in with the whiskey tray and got your hands on him. He must be a very worried man at this moment."

"One would imagine so, sir."

Something in the tone of Ditton's voice made Marron eye him closely. "If I may say so, Ditton, you don't sound very convinced."

"Frankly, sir, I'm not. In my profession one learns to observe and say nothing. Except for one small point I might well agree that Mr. Herbert, disguised as his brother, had murdered the master, and then had been unfortunate enough to lose his wig."

"And the small point?"

Ditton indicated the wig. "Would you be good enough to smell the inside of the wig, sir?"

Marron picked it up and sniffed at the inside. "Smells sweet, scented . . . Now, what is it? Ah, yes, kind of orange blossom . . ."

"Precisely, sir."

"So?"

"It is a hair lotion, sir. Called Eau d'Espagne. The only person in this house who uses it—Mr. Herbert being bald uses nothing—is Mr. Matthew."

Marron said nothing. He tapped out his pipe on a silver salver on the desk and saw Ditton wince.

"You see, sir, I think that Mr. Matthew did the murder. And he planned it very skillfully. Everyone in the house knew that I took the master his whiskey at a quarter to eleven. Mr. Matthew went in to his father wearing a fair wig over his own fair hair. He waited until he

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heard me coming, killed his father, and then turned out the lights. He came toward me so that we could grapple. He knew he could escape from me, being strong.

"As he went he deliberately dropped his wig. He was certain that this would incriminate his brother. And so it would have done except for the Eau d'Espagne. The smell is there because Mr. Matthew wore the wig over his own hair which is always liberally treated with the hair lotion."

Marron stood up and came round to Ditton. "You're wasted as a butler. You should have been a detective."

"If you say so, sir."

"I do say so, Ditton. You have the kind of talent which is wasted in your profession. You'd better stay here while I go and have a word with Mr. Matthew—" He smiled before turning to the door. "Yes, Ditton, in your profession and in mine we become acute observers of human nature—the small things. Mr. Matthew should have thought of his hair lotion before disguising himself as himself."

The Inspector went out of the study and while he was gone Ditton emptied the silver salver of his pipe ashes and polished it on his sleeve.

A few minutes later the Inspector came back alone and took up his position at the desk with the revolver in front of him.

Ditton said respectfully, "This is all very embarrassing, sir. Very."

"It is indeed," said Marron. "To see a man of intelligence condemn himself by one small mistake. How often it happens."

"I'm sorry for poor Mr. Matthew."

Marron shook his head. "Not Mr. Matthew, Ditton. But you."

"Me, sir?"

"Yes, you, Ditton. You almost got away with it, but I happened to tread on some of the broken glass as I went into the conservatory." He put half a broken tumbler on the desk before him. "This gave you away, Ditton. The stuff you had to drop and smash to make your story good."

"Sir?"

"You always took a tray with a decanter of whiskey and a glass to your master at night. And he liked everything of the finest. Venetian glass, or fine old English glass. You wouldn't have dared serve him in anything else. But this is a cheap kitchen tumbler and the decanter was a cheap one too. You couldn't bring yourself to break good glass, could you, Ditton? And you took in cheap stuff because you knew your master would never use it. A small point, but enough to blow your otherwise extremely clever story sky high. Do you agree?"

Ditton's face assumed a solemn look and then with a slow lift of his shoulders, he said respectfully, 'I entirely agree, sir."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **HENRY SLESAR**

TITLE: ***The Accomplice***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *At 71 rich Uncle Max was so hale and hearty he could go on for years. But Andrew, the only heir, could not wait. So he devised a foolproof scheme . . . .*

SLATE-COLORED SKIES, AND A FOG so low that it obscured the peaks of the *S.S. Amapol's* stacks, were just the kind of weather phenomena that suited Andrew Vanner's state of mind.

He leaned his elbows on the railing and stared gloomily in the direction of the city he was leaving behind, listening to the bellowing foghorns and the clanging of the invisible tugs that were circling the ship like worried mother hens. It was a hell of a place to be spending his twentieth birthday, but the company he was in made it even worse. He looked up at the old man beside him, and saw that Uncle Max was grinning like a thin Teddy Roosevelt.

"Wonderful sounds, eh?" Uncle Max said enthusiastically. "Ever since I was a boy, I've loved the sounds of the sea."

"It's not exactly the sea," Andrew said dryly. "We haven't left New York Harbor yet. Sure you're not cold, Uncle Max?"

The old man, who wore a burly tweed jacket with a heavy wool muffler about his neck, said, "Call this cold? That's the trouble with you, Andrew, you're too soft. Trouble with all you youngsters. Be surprised what a brisk morning walk and a good ice-cold shower can do for your system." He then added slyly, "Might not get so many foolish ideas, if you know what I mean."

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Andrew knew what he meant, but he didn't say so. It was no use talking about Bettina, not any more. There had been nothing but talk of Bettina for the past two months, and he was tired of it. All his brave assertions about marrying her, in spite of Uncle Max and the delicious stacks of cash, bonds, negotiable securities, and real estate that Andrew would inherit on Uncle Max's demise, had come to nothing. For here he was, on the First Class deck of the *S. S. Amapol,* bound for the sunshine route to Italy and Europe, against his will but very much in favor of Uncle Max's.

And Bettina? Andrew tortured himself with her image. Bettina was busy being a living Statue in the Las Vegas club where Andrew had first met her. He knew he wasn't going to forget her; few men could forget a Living Statue sculptured the way Bettina was. A sea voyage and a trip abroad was no longer the miracle drug for his kind of disease, even if his guardian was fool enough to think so.

A steward went hustling by them, but Uncle Max's thin arm snaked out and grabbed him. "What's happening, Captain?" he asked merrily. "We going to leave today or not?"

"Yes, sir, I think the fog's lifting a bit. We ought to be under way in another half hour."

"Fine," Uncle Max chuckled, and rubbed his dry palms together. "Tell you what, Andrew, why don't you and I go to the lounge and play a little cribbage? Then after we're under way, we'll have ourselves a nice brisk walk around the deck. How does that sound?"

Andrew rolled his eyes. "I never heard anything better, Uncle Max."

The old man's arms circled his nephew's shoulder, and they went below together.

At six o'clock the *S.S. Amapol's* engines began to churn slowly and the ship sent a farewell toot to the shore. As it backed out of its berth, Uncle Max grinned a jolly grin at Andrew and pegged two on the cribbage board. Andrew yawned, and looked idly about at the lounge's occupants. The average age was at least sixty, but he wasn't surprised. If he knew his Uncle Max, the passenger list had been checked to make sure another Bettina wouldn't be aboard. It was going to be a miserable voyage.

It was at the dinner table that the drastic idea first flashed across Andrew's mind. He watched with distaste as his uncle collared the waiter and gave him precise and detailed directions for the preparation of his meal. It was to contain no cooked meat or vegetables, no fats, no oil, no butter, nor shortening. The thin patty of hamburger was to be served raw on whole wheat bread; the fresh vegetables were to be brought to the table untouched—the old man would dice them himself into a bowl of

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cottage cheese. Andrew, listening, felt sick.

When the waiter left, mopping and shaking his head at the same time, Uncle Max chuckled and nudged his nephew. "One of the advantages of being rich," he whispered. "You don't have to give a damn what other people think."

"I'd sure like that," Andrew smiled weakly.

But as he observed his uncle devour the unappetizing meal, he realized that all his peculiarities, the rigid diet, the daily exercise, had indeed made a difference. At seventy-one, Uncle Max looked barely more than fifty. He was strong. He was hale. He was hearty. He could probably go on forever. Forever! To a young man like Andrew Vanner, it sounded like a very long time.

"Delicious," Uncle Max said, a crumb of cucumber falling on his chin. "Delicious, Andrew! You should really try it."

"You know," Andrew said dreamily. "I think maybe I will, Uncle Max."

But later, on the way to their cabins, Andrew's stomach did a slow somersault and rejected the entire meal. Uncle Max called it seasickness, but Andrew knew it was a great deal more than that.

"You'll be fine," Uncle Max said. "Takes time to develop a good sea-stomach." He slapped his own affectionately. "You'll feel better in the morning, wait and see. I don't know about you, but I plan to get up at the crack of dawn and take a nice stroll around the deck. How about it, Andrew? Will you join me?"

"I don't think so," his nephew said feebly. "If you don't mind, Uncle."

"I'll win you over yet," Uncle Max said determinedly. "Sleep well, my boy."

The Vanners had separate accommodations, and Andrew was grateful for his uncle's penchant for privacy. He liked it, too, especially that first night at sea. Young Andrew had a great deal of thinking to do, and he lay back on the bunk with his arms folded behind his head, staring through the murky glass of the porthole that looked out into nothing but fog and darkness.

Shortly past midnight he pulled the covers aside, got up, and located a suitcase. He took out the small, expensive travel-alarm that his uncle had given him before the start of the trip and set the alarm hand at 4:30. Then he wound the clock carefully, and placed it near his head. Its gentle ticking soothed him to sleep.

When the buzzer irritated him awake, he reacted with anger. His hand swept out and knocked the alarm clock to the floor; the crystal shattered and the clock lay silent, a mechanical corpse. He picked it up, grunted, and started to grope for his clothes. There was only

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darkness inside and out, and he wondered what time dawn was supposed to crack in the mid-Atlantic.

At ten minutes to five, wearing two thicknesses of sweater and a pair of sneakers, he went down the narrow passageway to his uncle's room. He rapped gently, and called his name. There was no answer; either the old man was sleeping or already on deck. Knowing Uncle Max, Andrew was sure it was the latter.

He came out on deck and found that the darkness was a compound of night and fog. It rolled about the ship in smudy gray billows, so dense that the *S.S. Amapol* appeared to be strangely truncated. The deck was deserted, the few deck chairs scattered about were dripping with moisture, the planks slippery. He shivered, and moved cautiously along the rail toward the bow.

When he saw the weirdly contorted figure rising from the mists, he gasped audibly. Then he realized that it was only his Uncle Max, in the throes of a deep knee-bend. He came toward him, and when the old man straightened up, Andrew heard Uncle Max cackle with pleasure.

"Well! What a delightful surprise, Andrew. I thought you had decided to sleep late this morning?"

"I changed my mind," Andrew said sheepishly. "Maybe it would do me good to join—I don't get much exercise."

"Nothing in the world like exercise," Uncle Max said cheerfully. "I get a full hour every day. Swimming's my favorite—I'm certainly looking forward to that."

"Are you really?" Andrew said, with much interest.

"Yes, I understand they've got a marvelous pool on board. And deck tennis. We've got to play a lot of deck tennis, Andrew."

"We really must," the young man murmured. "You know something, Uncle Max, there's something I've been meaning to ask you—"

Uncle Max trotted in one place for a while before answering. "Yes, Andrew?"

"You never did tell me what your estate really consists of. I mean, I know you have all sorts of investments, but just what? I mean, what do they add up to?"

The old man chuckled. "Lost count of them myself, years ago. I suppose it's something in the neighborhood of two millions, perhaps a bit more."

"Gee, that's quite a responsibility, isn't it? I mean, for someone like me it would be."

"When that time comes, Andrew, I'm sure you'll do fine. You'll be *mature* then. You see," he laughed, "I intend to be around a good many years."

Andrew moved in closer, his hand seeking the rail.

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"Do you really, Uncle?"

"What's that?"

"I said, what makes you so sure?"

Uncle Max stopped trotting and peered through the fog to find his nephew's eyes. When he didn't see any twinkle in them, he frowned and clucked disapproval.

"Don't talk like that, Andrew. Don't like it at all."

"I didn't mean any harm, Uncle. You know what I think of you." He put his hand on the old man's arm.

"Sometimes I'm not sure," Uncle Max snapped.

The feel of the skinny arm under his hand was reassuring; for all of Uncle Max's vitality, the arm was frail, a mere chicken bone. Andrew tightened his grip and came closer; his other hand caught the old man's left wrist and began using it as a lever to draw him back toward the railing.

"What are you doing?" Uncle Max said, annoyed. "I don't feel like playing games, Andrew."

"It's a new kind of exercise," Andrew said, smiling grimly. "You'll like it, Uncle Max."

"You're hurting me, Andrew! Stop this instant!"

"Sure, Uncle. Anything you say."

He relaxed just enough to throw the old man off guard; then he pushed mightily until he felt his uncle's spine touching the ship's rail. With another heave, Uncle Max was halfway over the side, and beginning to yelp. Andrew clamped his hand over the old man's mouth, and kept on pushing.

"You said you liked swimming," Andrew panted. "Here's your chance, Uncle. You can swim all the way to Europe."

"Andrew!" the old man cried, muffled and unheard.

Then he was out of sight.

Two seconds later there was a satisfying splash in the dark water below.

Andrew was expecting a nervous reaction, but none came. He admired his own calmness, and looked swiftly about to see if the scene had been witnessed. Only the fog, his accomplice, was visible.

Then he returned to his cabin, meeting no one along the way.

Inside his stateroom, feeling warm and secure, Andrew debated his next move. It was just after five o'clock; he had a choice of sitting up for the rest of the night and then making the appalling discovery of his uncle's disappearance, or of returning to bed and allowing the breakfast steward to waken him.

The decision wasn't hard to make; he found himself yawning and pleasantly drowsy, so he undressed and went back to bed. The idea that he would greet tomorrow as a rich man was delightful to contemplate.

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He fell asleep quickly, and dreamed of Bettina . . .

The steward's knock came as expected, but Andrew was still startled at the sound of it. He took a moment to recover, then called out and asked who it was.

"It's eight o'clock, Mr. Vanner. You wanted me to wake you at eight."

"Don't go away," Andrew said. He hopped out of bed and pulled on his trousers. Then he admitted the small, neat man and said, "I think I'd like a Continental breakfast this morning, steward—just rolls and coffee."

"Certainly, sir."

"Er, did you see my uncle this morning? I think he left an earlier call."

"I knocked on Mr. Vanner's door, but there wasn't any answer. Shall I bring him a breakfast, too?"

"No, don't bother," Andrew yawned. "My uncle's quite a heavy sleeper." He looked toward the porthole and caught a glimpse of clearing sky. "Looks like a little better weather this morning, doesn't it?"

"Oh, yes," the steward beamed. "We ought to be under way in just a little while now."

"Under way?" Andrew blinked. "Have we been becalmed or something?"

"Oh, no, sir," the steward chuckled. "As a matter of fact, we ran into quite a lot of thick fog last night and the Captain thought it was a bit too much. So he turned the ship about at one thirty and brought us back to port."

"Back to port?" Andrew said. "What do you mean, back to port?"

"We've been berthed since three o'clock last night," the steward smiled. "But don't you worry, Mr. Vanner, we'll make up the time—the *Amapol's* a good fast ship."

Andrew stared in disbelief, then scrambled to the porthole of his cabin.

The tall buildings of the Manhattan skyline were clearly visible, and so was something else.

There was a police car on the pier and a group of officers starting up the lowered gangplank—and in their midst, looking hale, hearty, and refreshed after an invigorating swim, was his Uncle Max.

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IF THE JOURNEY HAD NO END

by REBECCA WEST

ONE AUTUMN EVENING a woman in her early forties walked along the platform of the Terminal Station in Rome and boarded a *wagon-lit* in the Paris Express. She sat down on the made-up bed in her compartment, took off her small, inconspicuous hat, and looked about her with an air of annoyance.

It was a long time since she had traveled by rail, and she had been pushed to it against her will, because there had not been a seat free on any of the planes leaving Rome that day or the next. But this was the least of her worries, and she wasted no time on it, but set about arranging her passport and her tickets in order to have them ready when the *wagon-lit* attendant arrived. This required close scrutiny, for although she was a Frenchwoman named Madame Rémy, another impression was conveyed by her passport, her tickets, and the labels on her luggage, and she had to remind herself what that impression was, for only a few hours before she had been yet a third person.

Such inconsistencies, however, never made her nervous. They were unlikely to be noticed because she herself was so unnoticable. She was neither tall nor short, dark nor fair, handsome nor ugly. She left a pleasant impression on those she

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met in her quiet passage through the world, and then these people forgot her. She had no remarkable attributes except some which were without outward sign, such as a command of six languages and an unusually good memory.

When the door opened, Madame Rémy had not quite finished getting her papers out of a handbag which had more than the usual number of pockets and flaps in it, and some very intricate fastenings. Without raising her head, she asked the attendant to wait a moment, in her excellent Italian, which, just for verisimilitude, had a slight Florentine accent. Then, as he did not answer, she looked up sharply. She had only time to notice that he was wearing not the uniform of a *wagon-lit* attendant but a dark gray suit with a checked blue muffler, and that his pale face was shining with sweat. Then the door banged between them.

She did not follow him, because she was as highly disciplined as any soldier, and she knew that her first concern must be with the tiny ball of paper which he had dropped in her lap.

When she had unrolled it she read a typewritten message: "A man is traveling on this train under orders to kill you."

She rolled it up again and went into the corridor and stood there, looking out at the crowds on the ill-lit platform. It would have been unwise to leave the train. A clever man with a knife, she calculated, could do his work among the shadows and get away quite easily.

Several times she had to step back into her compartment, to get out of the way of passengers who were coming aboard, and at these, if they were male, she looked with some interest. She was standing thus, looking up with a noncommittal glance, neither too blank nor too keenly interested, at a tall man in a tweed overcoat and wondering if he were so tall as to be specially memorable, and therefore ineligible as an assassin, when she heard shouts from the platform.

The tall man came to a halt, and she crushed past him and stood beside him, looking out through the wide corridor window at a scene still as a painted picture. Everybody was motionless, even the porters with their luggage barrows, while four men made their way back to the platform gates, at a quiet and steady pace, two in front, and two behind who were walking backward. Their faces were darkened by masks, and all held revolvers which they pointed at the crowd.

The man beside Madame Rémy made a scandalized and bluff noise which told her that he was not an assassin, and at that moment the train began to move. He went on his way to his compartment and left Madame Rémy standing alone at the window, waiting to see what had happened at the end of the platform. But she saw nothing un-

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usual till the train was leaving the station behind it and sliding out into the open evening.

Then her eye was caught by the last iron pillar that held up the platform roof. A man was embracing it as if it were a beloved woman to whom he was bidding farewell. His suit was dark gray; and as he slid to the ground and toppled over and fell face upward, it could be seen that he was wearing a checked blue muffler.

Madame Rémy went back to her compartment and said a prayer for his soul. She looked at her hands with some distaste, because they were shaking, and took the little ball of paper out of her bag and read the message again. This was not because she feared she had forgotten it, or thought she had overlooked any of its implications, but because it interested her as a technician to see if there were any distinguishing marks in the type face which recalled any typed letters she had received before.

Then she thought of all the things it would be sensible to do, such as ringing for the attendant and showing him the message, out in the corridor, in front of some open door, in the hearing of some other passenger, preferably a woman, and she decided to do none of them.

She said aloud, "I am a lucky woman." Leaning back her head against the cushions, she repeated, "How very lucky I am."

There had seemed no way out of the wretchedness that was all around her. She was under no illusion as to the reason why the doctor she had consulted in Rome concerning a slight but persistent symptom had begged her to go into hospital for an X-ray examination the next day, and had urged her, when he found she was resolved to go back to Paris, not to let one day pass after she got there without seeking a surgeon. The thing was in her father's family, and she was familiar with its method of approach.

She was, moreover, in financial difficulties to which there could be no end. She had loved her dead husband very much, so much that she felt that she could deny nothing to the child of his first marriage. But Madeleine was sullen and unaffectionate, had early insisted on marrying a worthless young man and had three children already and might have more; and her only remarkable characteristic was a capacity for getting into debt without having anything to show for it in purchased goods.

Madame Rémy really did not see how she could meet this last crop of bills without selling either the few jewels remaining to her, which were those she wore so constantly (except when she was on duty) that they seemed part of her body, or her little house in Passy, where she had spent all her married life. In either case it would be a joyless

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sacrifice, for Madeleine had nothing of her father in her.

Also, it was evident to Madame Rémy that her long-standing friendship with Claude was over. Just before she left Paris she had heard again the rumor that he was going to marry the Armenian heiress, and his denial had left her in no doubt that they were going to part before very long, perhaps even without tenderness.

That would take from the last five years of her life the value which she had believed made them remarkable. She had always thought that she had taken up her peculiar work because she and a distinguished member of the French Foreign Office had fallen in love with each other, and that had made it a romantic adventure. But now she suspected that a member of the French Foreign Office had had a love affair with her because she had an aptitude for a certain peculiar kind of work; and thought she recognized that even if this were so, Claude had formed some real affection for her, and that she owed him gratitude for much charming companionship; she knew that she would never be able to look back on their relations without a sense of humiliation.

Even her work, in which she had hoped to find her main interest as her life went on, would now be darkened in her mind by association with a long pretense, and her own gullibility. There was nothing at the end of her journey except several sorts of pain, so if the journey had no end there was no reason for grief.

When she had worked it out to her final satisfaction she found that the *wagon-lit* attendant was standing in front of her, asking for her tickets and passport. She gave them to him slowly, feeling a certain sense of luxury, because his presence meant her last hope of life, and she was not taking it. They wished each other good night, and then she called him back, because it had occurred to her that it would be hardly fair if he had to go without his tip in the morning just because she was dead. Agents were trained never to make themselves memorable by giving more or less than the standard tip, and she acted according to habit, but regretted it, for surely the occasion called for a little lavishness. As she explained to him that she was giving him the tip in case they were rushed at the other end, she noted his casual air. He was evidently to be the second last man she was to see, not the last.

Once she was alone, she burned the message in her washbasin, and pulled up the window blind so that she could look at the bright villages and the dark countryside that raced by. She thought of the smell of anesthetics that hangs about the vestibules of clinics; and she thought of the last time she had met Madame Couthier in the

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Champs Elysées and how Madame Couthier had looked through her as if they had never been at school together, and how it had turned out that Madeleine had run up a huge bill with young Couthier, who was finding it hard to make his way as an interior decorator.

She thought of an evening, just before she had heard the rumor about the Armenian heiress, when Claude had driven her back from dinner at Ville-d'Avray, and she had rested her head against his shoulder for a minute when the road was dark, and had kissed his sleeve. Claude and she were the same age, yet she felt hot with shame when she remembered this, as if she had been an old woman doting on a boy.

She pulled down the blind and began to make very careful preparations for the night. Her large case was on the rack, and she did not care to ring for the attendant and ask him to move it for her, lest somebody else should come in his stead and the attack be precipitated before she was ready for it. But she was obliged to get it down, because she had packed in it her best nightgown, which was made of pleated white chiffon. For a reason she had never understood she had always liked to carry it with her when she went on a specially dangerous enterprise; and now she saw that it had been a sensible thing to do.

It was very pleasant to put it on after she had undressed and washed very carefully, rubbing herself down with toilet water, as she could not have a bath. After she had made up her face again and recoiffed her hair, she lay down between the sheets. Then it occurred to her that she had not unpacked her bedroom slippers, and she made a move to get out of bed before she realized that she need not take the trouble.

She turned out the big light in the compartment ceiling and left on only the little reading lamp at the head of her bed. She had not locked the door. Her careful toilette had made her tired; and indeed she had been working very hard for some days, preparing all the papers that were now safe in her embassy.

She thought of Madeleine and Claude, and bleakly realized that she had no desire to see either of them ever again. She tried to remember something pleasant, and found that for that she had to go back to the days when her husband was alive. It had been delightful when he came back in the evenings from his office, particularly at this very time of year, in the autumn, when he brought her sweet-smelling bouquets of bronze and gold chrysanthemums, and after tea they did not light the lamps, and sat with the firelight playing on the Japanese gilt wallpaper.

It had been delightful, too, when

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they went for holidays in Switzerland and skied in winter and climbed in summer, and he always was astounded and pleased by her courage. But dear Louis was not at the end of her journey. There was nothing waiting for her there but Madeleine and Claude, and the smell that hangs about the vestibules of clinics.

The train slowed down at a station. There were cries, lurchings and trampings in the corridors, long periods of silence and immobility, a thin blast on a trumpet; and the train jerked forward again. That happened a second time, and a third. But still the man who was traveling under orders did not come to carry them out.

Madame Rémy turned out the reading lamp and prayed to the darkness that he might hurry; and then for a little, retreating again from the thought of Madeleine and Claude to the memory of her husband, she passed into something nearly a dream.

But she was fully awake as soon as someone tried the lock of the door with a wire. It was as if a bucket had been emptied over her, a bucket filled, not with water but with fear. There was not a part of her which was not drenched with terror.

She disliked this emotion, which she had never felt before except in a slight degree, just as much as added to the zest of an enterprise. To escape from this shuddering abasement she reminded herself that she wanted to die, she had chosen to die, and she sat up and cried, "Entrez! Entrate!"..

The door swung open and softly closed again. There followed a silence, and, feeling fear coming on her again, she switched on the light.

It was a relief to her that the man who was standing with his back to the door did not wear the uniform of a *wagon-lit* attendant, and that he was the sort of person who would be selected for such a mission. He was young and lean and spectacled, and wore a soft hat crushed down over his brows and a loose greatcoat with the collar turned up, in a way that she tenderly noted as amateurish. It would be very hard for him to get away from the scene of a crime without arousing suspicion.

There was also a sign that he was the man for whom she was waiting, in the woodenness of his features and his posture. He knew quite well that what he was doing was wrong, and to persuade himself that it was right, he had had to stop the natural flow of not only his thoughts and feelings but his muscles.

Yet he made no move to commit the violent act for which this rigidity had been a preparation. Simply he stood there, staring at her. She thought, *Poor child, he is very young,* and remained quite still, fearing to do anything which

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might turn him from his resolution. But he went on staring at her. *Is he never going to do it?* she asked herself, wondering at the same time whether it was a cord or a knife that he was fingering in the pocket of his greatcoat.

It occurred to her that with such a slow-moving assailant she had still a very good chance of making a fight for her life and saving it. But then there came to her the look of surgical instruments on a tray, the whine that came into Madeleine's voice when she spoke of the inevitability of debt, and the fluency, which now recalled to her a conjurer's patter, of Claude's lovemaking; and she was conscious of the immense distance that divided her from the only real happiness she had ever known.

She flung open her arms in invitation to the assassin, smiling at him to assure him that she felt no ill will against him, that all she asked of him was to do his work quickly.

Suddenly he stepped backward, and she found herself looking at the door with a stare as fixed as his own. She had made an absurd mistake. This was simply a fellow passenger who had mistaken the number of his compartment, and all the signs she had read in his appearance were fictions of her own mind, excited by the typewritten message.

It was a disappointment, but she did not allow it to depress her. When she thought of the man in the dark gray suit with the checked blue muffler, sliding down the pillar and turning over as he reached the ground, it was as a child might think of an adult who had made it a promise. She contemplated in sorrow and wonder the fact that a stranger had given up his life because he wished her well, and switched out the light and again said a prayer for him into the darkness. Then, although she had no reason to suppose that the man who was traveling under orders would come sooner or later to carry them out, she grew drowsy.

"What, not stay awake even to be assassinated?" she muttered to her pillow, and laughed, and was swallowed up by sleep, deep sleep, such as had often come on her at the end of a long day on the mountains.

The next morning a spectacled young man, wearing a soft hat and a loose greatcoat, who had made his way back to Rome while the sun came up, stood in a hotel room and gave a disappointing report to his superior.

He said, "Madame Rémy was not on the train. It was all a mistake. There was one woman who answered to the description, and I went into her compartment, but I found she was quite a different sort of person. She was not at all haggard and worn; indeed, she looked much younger than the age you

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gave me, and she was very animated. And though we know that if Ferrero found Madame Rémy on the train he must have warned her, this woman was not at all frightened. She had left her door unlocked, and when she saw me she showed no fear at all. Indeed," he said gloomily, "she was evidently a loose woman. Though she was in bed her face was painted, and her hair was done up as if she were going to a ball, and it was really quite extraordinary—she even stretched out her arms and smiled at me. I think," he asserted, blushing faintly, "that if I had cared to stay in her compartment I would have received quite a warm welcome."

His superior expressed an unfavorable opinion regarding the morals of all bourgeois women, but had his doubts, and made certain inquiries. As a result, the spectacled young man was doomed not to realize what was at that time his dearest ambition, for he was never given another chance to commit a political assassination. He regretted this much less than he would have owned. Even then, standing in the golden sunshine of a Roman morning, he was not really disturbed because the night had been so innocent.

At that moment Madame Rémy was sitting in the restaurant car of the Paris Express, eating breakfast. She could have had it brought to her in her compartment, but she had felt a desire to have it where the windows were wider and she could see more of the countryside.

Her first pot of coffee had been so good that she had ordered a second, and she was spreading the butter on a roll, smiling a little, because it seemed so absurd that after such a night she should have awakened to find herself suddenly freed from the wretchedness that had hung about her for so long.

Certainly she had lost none of her troubles; but they no longer appalled her. There came to mind the names of several among her friends who had survived serious operations. As for Madeleine's debts, if nobody paid them it might help the poor silly child to grow up; and the wisest thing, even the loyalest thing, for her stepmother to do was to keep the jewels and the house that Louis Rémy had given her and leave them intact to Madeleine's children.

It might well be true that she could no longer support the desperate nature of her present work, but there was no need for her days to be idle, for the great dressmaker, Mariol, had always had a liking for her and had more than once offered her a position in his business. And there was no need for her to think of Claude. If she wanted to think of someone who was not there any more, she could remember Louis.

Some other names occurred to her: the names of people who had

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not survived operations. But they cast no darkness on her mind; she was conscious only of a certain grandeur, and they went from her. For all her interest was given to looking out the window at what she was seeing again only because of some inexplicable carelessness on the part of those who were usually careful.

Now the train was running toward the mountains, and was passing through a valley in the foothills. There were cliffs, steel-gray where the sun caught them, dark blue in the shadow, rising to heights patterned with the first snows, glistening sugar-white under the sharp blue sky. At the foot of the cliffs a line of poplars, golden with autumn, marked the course of a broad and shallow river racing over gray shingle; and between the river and the railway track was a field where a few corn shocks, like dried, gesticulating men, were still standing among some trailing mist not yet having burned away.

Across this field, through the mists, an old man in a dark blue shirt and light blue trousers was leading a red cart, drawn by two oxen the color of the coffee and milk in her cup. Deliberately the two beasts trod, so slowly that they seemed to sleep between paces, so dutifully that if they were dreaming it must be of industry. There was nothing very beautiful in the scene, yet it was wonderful, and it existed, it would go on being there when she was far away.

As the train met the mountains and passed into a tunnel, she closed her eyes so that she could go on seeing the cliffs and the snow and the poplars, the man and his cart and his oxen. Amazed by what the world looked like when one had thought it lost and had found it again, she sat quite still, in a trance of contentment, while the train carried her on to the end of her journey.

NEXT MONTH . . .

HUGH PENTECOST's *The Sooty Man*
and a thriller à la Black Mask
BRYCE WALTON's *The Woman Who Wanted To Live*

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We welcome the first appearance in EQMM of Matt Taylor, creator of Dan McGarry, the cop who has enjoyed a long and honorable career in "This Week" magazine.

"Power of the Press" shows the impact of a newspaper story on three people—how the story of an unsolved murder affected and changed the lives of a police lieutenant, an eyewitness, and—a murderer.

POWER OF THE PRESS

by MATT TAYLOR

THERE WERE MANY THOUSANDS IN the city who read *The Sentinel's* feature story that Saturday in May. Of all these there were three, and only three, to whom it was to matter. Within eight hours their lives would be changed.

Fred Meyer first.

He was a small, frail man of sixty-eight. He had been living alone for the past three years in a two-room basement apartment on East Ninety-first Street near the river. He had his social security and small monthly checks from his three children to supplement it, and he was, up to this eventful Saturday, a contented man.

Fred Meyer's phone rang at nine in the morning.

He knew before he answered who it would be. The phone was a luxury his son Paul, with whom he had formerly lived, insisted on providing. Paul worried about his father living alone ever since the old man had had his fall in the basement the previous winter and had lain helpless with a sprained ankle for an hour before his cries for help were heard.

Fred Meyer talked to his son. Then to two of his grandchildren. When he hung up he put on his hat and took his cane from its place near the door. His ankle had long since mended, but the carrying of the cane had become a habit. He walked to the corner stationery store for his paper.

It was nine twenty-five when he settled down to it in his basement apartment.

He drew in his breath sharply when he came to the feature story. The large headline read: *HELP FIND THE KILLERS. The Sentinel* was offering a reward of $10,000. to the person who could supply a clue that would solve any of the city's long-unsolved murders. Somewhere, *The Sentinel* insisted, there must be persons who could come forth with information that would help find and convict the killers. It was the newspaper's hope

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to tempt these people to talk and thus see justice done.

The killing described below the headline was the sensational Nickerson murder, now four years past, an event responsible for Fred Meyer's occasional bad dreams. Now, as he read, fear mounted in him again.

The Sentinel's feature writer, digging back into the files, had come up with a fine, fancy job. Nickerson, a wealthy underworld figure, had been a combination gambler, con man, and swindler. He had been living in lavish style in New Jersey, but it pleased him to use as an office a two-room suite on the top floor of a small dingy hotel in the West Forties. Perhaps he did not want unsavory characters and stormy scenes in his fine home, or perhaps he preferred this neighborhood of his delinquent beginnings.

It was in this sixth-floor suite that he had been found by the maid on a hot August morning. She let herself in with her passkey and saw the body, face downward on the floor, the knife wound clear and ugly in his back.

He had been killed sometime between one and three a.m. There were no fingerprints. The door had not been forced, so the visitor had either been known or expected. On a table were an open bottle of liquor and two empty glasses. Nickerson's prints were on one of the glasses. On the other—nothing. Obviously there had been a friendly drink with a visitor, following which Nickerson had unsuspectingly turned his back.

There were only two people who might have seen the killer come or leave through the lobby. One was the night clerk. But he had a comfortable chair in a small room behind the desk and he had been dozing in it. The other was the night elevator operator. His name was Fred Meyer.

Meyer insisted that he had seen and heard nothing. He could very easily have been in the elevator on an upper floor when the murderer slipped through the deserted lobby to mount the five flights of stairs. And it could have been the same when the murderer left.

So there was no one to offer a description. The police had nothing to go on—not a single clue.

Fred Meyer finished reading and put the paper aside. His heart was pounding. The terrifying memories came welling up again. There was his name in print to remind him of what he had been through, the danger he and his family had been in and, for all he knew, still were in, now that the unsolved case had been revived.

Even though four years had passed, Fred Meyer still did not dare describe to the police the man he had seen leave the hotel on West Forty-fifth Street at one thirty that hot August night. But would that man, the murderer, be sure of his silence? He might at this moment

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be reading *The Sentinel*. $10,000. was a fortune to an old man. Would the man he had seen make sure the one witness against him would never talk? That man would not stop at mere threats now. He would act, and act fast.

Meyer went to his door and bolted it. He sank into his chair. There must be a way to protect himself. He had to think—and there might not be much time.

The second person to read *The Sentinel* was Louis Vincente. He had slept until noon after a late night of heavy drinking. He was in his luxurious Westchester apartment which, like his expensive clothes and ample spending money, was provided by a blonde and wealthy not-too-young divorcee who, for some reason, found his rough manner, coarse features, and hulking form irresistible.

He made coffee and drank three cups black. Then he went to the door. *The Sentinel* was delivered to him every morning. He sprawled out on a couch with it. It was one fifteen.

Unlike Fred Meyer, he was angered rather than frightened by what he read. It was his bad luck they had raked it all up again. $10,000. reward! It was enough to start even a frightened and timid old man thinking. Like Fred Meyer, Vincente had had bad dreams over the past four years. In them a frail, small old man stood in front of him, laughing and pointing and saying, "There he is! That's the man! He's the one!"

His gambling debts to Nickerson had mounted at an alarming rate. When they had risen to more than $5,000., Nickerson had called a halt. By the fifteenth of August, he had said, or he would take action. This, Vincente knew, meant only one thing. Nickerson hired a variety of hoods or, if the offense was grievous, an assassin. The size of his debt would be considered a grievous offense.

"Get it here somehow," Nickerson had told him. "Go rob a bank, if you have to."

And this, after careul planning, was exactly what Vincente did. It wasn't his first robbery, nor his fourth, but it was his most daring. The bank was a small suburban branch. There was no guard on duty and the teller was satisfactorily terrified. Vincente was two miles away in a stolen car before the search was on.

Safe in his hotel room he had counted his haul. Six thousand. Nearly all of it would have to go to Nickerson. Or would it? He had risked ten to twenty years of his freedom to get the money. He had a gun, and also a knife with a six-inch blade. The knife would be silent and safer. He phoned Nickerson. He would be there with the money, he said, by one o'clock.

The hotel on Forty-fifth was a mile from his own and the night

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was torrid-hot and sultry. But he decided to walk rather than take a taxi. Taxi drivers had a way of remembering late-at-night fares.

Half the front of the hotel was a liquor store. The lobby itself was no more than twenty-five feet wide. If there was a clerk behind the desk, Vincente, standing in the street mopping his forehead, could not see him. The old elevator man sat on a bench in the lobby. The old man had taken him up to Nickerson's rooms a score of times in the past year. He might even know his name. He waited until the old man went into the elevator to answer a call. Then Vincente slipped inside to the stairs.

Once inside the stairwell, he climbed the five flights leisurely. Cautiously, he looked out into the sixth floor hall. The doors to the two penthouse apartments were closed. A third door, opening to a portion of roof, was open. There was no one in sight.

Nickerson himself opened the door—he was alone. Vincente went inside and handed him a thick roll of money. "Count it," he said.

Nickerson laughed. "No need," he said. "You're not that dumb. Let's have a drink."

They had their drinks and talked for fifteen minutes. Then Nickerson walked to a table for a cigarette. He obligingly turned his back as he lit it.

Vincente moved fast. The job was swiftly, efficiently, and silently done. He carefully wiped away all possible prints and repocketed the money.

From here on his plan was simple. He would go out into the hall and to the stairs. He would go down to the second floor. There, if all was clear, he would return to the hall and ring for the elevator. When the indicator showed the elevator on its way up he would run down the final flight of stairs. By the time the aged, slow-moving elevator had made its fruitless trip up and returned to the lobby, Vincente would be safe in the street and on his way.

The hall was empty. He started for the stairs. When he had almost reached them the unforeseen happened. Fred Meyer came from the roof through the open door.

"You want to go down, mister?" Fred Meyer said.

Vincente scowled. "What you doing up here, Pop?"

"It's hot tonight. I come up to the roof sometime for a little air. I can hear the elevator buzzer if anyone rings. These old-fashioned elevators, they buzz instead of lighting up."

Vincente nodded. "Take me down."

They went into the elevator together. Meyer closed the door. When they were midway between the fourth and third floors Vincente tapped the old man on the shoulder. "Stop it here!" he said.

Meyer's eyes widened. "Here?"

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"Do like I say!" Vincente snapped, and Meyer stopped the elevator.

Vincente swung the old man around to face him, and the palm of his hand whipped full strength across the cheek already ashen with fright. The old man dropped.

Vincente pulled him to his feet and struck again, hard. "You didn't see me tonight, Pop! You get that?"

"S-sure, mister!" Meyer said weakly. "I didn't see you."

"They'll ask you tomorrow. They'll keep pounding at you. But you didn't see me!"

"I—I won't talk! Don't hit me again!"

"I'm gonna make sure you don't talk! What's your name, Pop?"

"Meyer. Fred Meyer."

"Where you live?"

"Forty-eight. West of Ninth."

"Alone?"

"With my son and his family."

"Any kids?"

"Three grandchildren."

"They healthy and good-looking?"

"They're—they're nice kids."

"Maybe they won't stay that way. Things can happen to kids. Bad things. If I don't take care of it myself, some of my friends will. I got a lot of friends, Pop. You talk, I got ways of knowing."

Meyer was trembling. "I didn't see you tonight!" he whispered.

Vincente nodded. He was satisfied. The old man scared easily, and he was scared to the bone. But he struck again—another hard blow, this time to the pit of the stomach. Meyer doubled up with pain. "Now down!" Vincente ordered.

Twenty minutes later he was back in his room.

He hid out in Brooklyn for the next month. But he was in touch with friends. The police weren't looking for him. The word wasn't out. The old man hadn't talked.

That was four years ago. And now, when he had everything he wanted, there was danger again. Murder was never outlawed. He was safe with the long-ago and lesser crimes of his younger years for which he had not served time; but homicide would hang over him as long as he lived.

He went to the phone and called the hotel on West Forty-fifth. Did a night elevator man named Meyer still work there?

"Old Fred quit three, four years ago," the clerk said.

"You know where he lives?"

"East Side somewhere. Lower Nineties, I think."

Vincente opened the phone book. What he found was more than he had hoped for. A Fred Meyer was listed as living on East Ninety-first. A shabby neighborhood. The old man obviously didn't have much. And he *could* have $10,000.—just by talking!

The knife he had used before was in the bottom drawer of his desk. He dressed hurriedly. The

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knife fitted neatly into his inside coat pocket. He took the elevator to the lobby and walked swiftly to the nearby garage where he kept his blue foreign sports car. As he swung into the suburban street he glanced at his watch. It was ten minutes before two. It would take him forty minutes to get to Ninety-first Street.

The Sentinel had been on the newsstands since nine. Meyer could have a five-hour start on him. He wished he had seen the paper a lot sooner.

At approximately this time Fred Meyer's phone rang. It was his son Paul again. "Dad!" Paul said, and there was a tenseness in his voice. "I just saw *The Sentinel*. Have you read it?"

"The Nickerson murder," Fred Meyer said. "I got my name in the paper again."

"I'm worried, Dad. I remember how you were when it happened four years ago. All upset. Sort of—well, sort of scared."

"That Lieutenant Gavin in Homicide gave me a hard time. Asked me questions six hours straight. Who wouldn't be upset?"

"But if you *did* see someone that night—I mean, ten thousand is a big reward. If the man you saw—I mean, will you come and stay with us for a couple of weeks?"

"Why should I? I'm all right here."

"But I can't help thinking—"

"You're a worrier, Paul."

"Well, maybe I am. If you're sure—"

"I'm sure," Fred Meyer said, and smiled.

"Then I'll forget it," Paul said, his voice relieved. "We'll see you tomorrow, won't we? It's Jenny's twelfth birthday, you know."

"I'll be there. I bought a birthday present for her yesterday. A set of paints."

"She'll like that, Dad. That kid loves to color. See you tomorrow."

"Goodbye, Paul."

Fred Meyer hung up. He put on his hat, took his cane, and unbolted the door. Outside, he looked around him carefully. Across the street from the aged, run-down building in which he lived was a children's playground. There were a few benches in front of it, facing the street.

At the corner he crossed with the traffic light. He went to one of the benches and sat in the sun, the cane between his knees, and waited.

The third person connected with the case to read *The Sentinel* was Lieutenant Gavin of Homicide. He was at his desk at Headquarters, a large man, florid-faced, with gray-brown hair and blue eyes that had a way of snapping when he concentrated.

It was ten minutes past two when Detective Young handed him *The Sentinel*.

Gavin scowled at the headline

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The Nickerson murder again! It had been the big one with him—the one that had mattered. Only recently he had said to Norah, his wife for twenty-five years, "It's the case I want to crack before I quit."

"You've lost enough sleep over that one," Norah said.

"I was in charge. There are no closed files on homicide."

"You've put in twenty-eight years. You could retire. We could have that place in Florida we've been talking about."

"I'll retire when they make me," Gavin said.

Young waited until Gavin had finished reading. Then he said, "Do you think the reward will flush out a witness for us?"

"There already is a witness—if he'd talk," Gavin said. "Old Fred Meyer, the elevator man. He claimed he didn't see anyone that night and didn't know anything. But he did. He does. I can tell when an old man is frightened. No, not frightened—terrified."

"You think the killer roughed him up?"

"There were no marks on him. But you can hurt a man without leaving marks. And you can leave marks on his mind that won't show."

His blue eyes snapped. "At that time Fred was living in a flat on Forty-eighth Street with his son and his family. There were three grandchildren. Kids can get hurt playing in the street. They can get hurt lots of ways. A killer throws a threat like that at a man and—well, who's to say? A nice old guy like Fred might panic."

He frowned thoughtfully. "If he was as frightened four years ago as I think he was, he won't talk now, even for this reward. But the killer wouldn't be sure of that. I've kept track of Fred, just in case. He's living alone on Ninety-first. He's in the phone book." He looked sharply at Young. "How long has *The Sentinel* been on the streets?"

"Since about nine. Maybe earlier in midtown."

"And it's past two now." Gavin reached for his phone and put in a call. He waited three minutes. "He doesn't answer. Let's get up there fast."

At two twenty-five Vincente parked his blue sports car opposite the apartment building on Ninety-first. He hurried across the street. He examined the rows of mail boxes and saw that Fred Meyer lived in a basement apartment. The old man might live alone or he might not. It was a risk, but one he had to take. He rang the bell and waited.

There was no answer. He pounded on the basement door. No one came. He cursed and turned away. Was he already too late? Was the old man at this moment describing him to the police? Identifying the picture of him the police had in their files from long ago?

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Then he saw an old man sitting on a bench across the street. He dodged through traffic to reach him.

There had been an accident on the Franklin D. Roosevelt Drive. Northbound traffic was backed up half a mile below Fifty-seventh. Gavin glanced at his watch impatiently. "Two thirty-five," he said to Young. "Get off as soon as you can and go back to First Avenue."

"The nearest exit is ten blocks from here," Young said.

Vincente stood a moment staring at the old man on the bench. The hair was whiter now, the lines on the face deeper. But the man was Fred Meyer.

He sat on the bench beside him. "I think I used to know you, Pop," he said.

Fred Meyer turned his head. "Maybe you did, mister," he said quietly.

"You were an elevator man in a hotel on Forty-fifth."

"That's right. Four years ago."

Vincente studied him. The old man gave no sign of startled recognition. He was pretending. Of that Vincente was sure. The old man had been expecting him and was ready with an act. He would never forget the face of the man who had beaten and terrified him that August night.

"You live in that building across the street?"

"Basement apartment. I got two rooms."

"You live alone?"

"All alone."

"Anyone in there now?"

"Who would be in there?"

Vincente smiled. Everything was going as he had hoped. He could force Fred Meyer to go with him to his basement. He would be alone with the old man. There would be no sound—only that of a frail body falling. No one would notice him enter or leave. What he had done so quickly and efficiently before, he would now do again.

"You and me are going back to your place," he said. "We got things to talk over."

"What sort of things?"

Vincente looked around. There were a number of people on the street. The playground behind him was filled with children on swings and slides. He moved cautiously. He pulled Fred Meyer gently to his feet. "Don't act like you don't know me, Pop!" he whispered.

"How could I know you?"

"Knock it off! It ain't likely you forgot!"

"I can't see you," Fred Meyer said.

Vincente gasped. "Can't *see?*"

"I been blind for two years, mister," the old man said quietly.

"Blind? You're—you're lying, Pop!"

Fred Meyer lifted his cane. The lower twelve inches of it were painted red. "Why do you think I use

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this? It's so people will know and help. It's a blind man's cane."

He moved forward slowly with shuffling steps. His cane kept tapping the sidewalk. "I can get to the corner where the traffic light is. You'll have to help me cross. Someone always helps a blind man."

Blind! Vincente felt like shouting. A wave of relief swept through him. The one witness, the only man who had the power to identify him, would never identify him now! It was incredible luck! Unforeseen, life-saving luck. The deep-down fear of a homicide charge was now gone forever.

Suddenly he frowned. "Wait a minute, Pop!" he said. He moved his hand rapidly back and forth in front of the staring eyes. The eyes did not move, nor did the eyelids flicker.

He laughed then. He laughed long and loud, exultantly. "Go back and sit in the sun, old guy!" he said. "Sit there for the rest of your life. It's lucky for you you're blind. You'll never know how lucky."

Fred Meyer stood motionless for a moment. Then he tapped his way back to his bench. He sat there staring straight ahead as blind men do, until Vincente got into his car. As the car passed, Vincente, still smiling, gave a final glance at the blind man. Meyer turned his head then. There was the small matter of the license number.

The sports car rounded the corner. Whereupon Meyer moved rapidly. He crossed the street, his eyes shining. As he turned to go down the few steps to his basement, he heard his name called. A large, florid-faced man stepped from the car that had drawn up at the curb, and hurried to him.

"Remember me, Fred?" Gavin said.

"Lieutenant Gavin," Meyer said. "I was just going to call you."

"Fred, did you read *The Sentinel* today? *If* you saw someone that night of the murder, you may be in bad trouble. If—"

Fred Meyer smiled. "There's no if any more," he said. "I'm safe now. So are the kids. I did see someone that night. And I saw him again just a minute ago."

"He came here? Did he try to—"

"I think he planned to." The old man chuckled. "But he let himself get talked out of it. You want to know about him? Nickerson used to call him Louis. I don't know his last name. He's big—maybe two hundred pounds. Reddish-brown hair. Broad nose and thick lips. He shouldn't be hard to find. He's driving a blue sports car. Some foreign make. License number is 7717 WE. He—"

"Let's get to your phone, Fred!"

Two hours later Meyer was sitting in Gavin's office at Headquarters, waiting. Finally the door opened. Three men came in. The man between Gavin and Young was Vincente.

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Fred Meyer stood up quickly. He smiled and pointed. "That's the man! He's the one!"

A frail old man standing in front of him. Laughing at him. Pointing to him. Sending him to his doom. For Louis Vincente it was a nightmare come true.

The time was exactly five o'clock. *The Sentinel* had been on the newsstands eight hours.

Gavin told his wife about it that evening. "Old Fred was a lot smarter than you'd think," he said. "He figured Vincente would see him on the bench across the street. He was safer there than in his basement. Being blind was sure-fire protection. A sightless identifying witness is no witness at all. He had a cane and he painted the bottom of it red with a child's paint set he'd bought for his granddaughter's birthday. He practiced staring like a blind man and moving his hand back and forth in front of his eyes to get used to it."

"I don't know when I've ever seen you so satisfied," Norah said.

Gavin laughed. "You never have," he said. "Vincente had the knife on him when we picked him up. That makes it a concealed weapon charge on top of suspicion of murder. Meyer says Vincente had visited Nickerson often before the murder. We talked to the hotel clerk. He knew about Vincente's gambling debts to Nickerson. So he had a motive."

"We'll get a conviction," he went on, "and old Fred will collect from *The Sentinel*. Funny how a newspaper story can change people's lives! Vincente gets what he deserves and the old man gets himself a small fortune."

"That leaves us," Norah said.

"I've been thinking about us," Gavin said. "As you say, I've put in twenty-eight years. I can retire. I'm ready for it now. The Nickerson file will be closed."

"The power of the press," Norah said. She rose and kissed him on the forehead. "Florida," she said, "here we come!"

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ABOUT OUR COVERS—

Recently, we have been experimenting with dramatic, colorful covers designed to illustrate exciting episodes of stories contained in the magazine (See this issue). Many of our readers have objected and expressed their preference for more conservative covers with a design rather than an action motif (Similar to last month's anniversary cover). Your editors have decided to go along with the objectors and beginning with the next issue the more conservative cover will predominate on EQMM.

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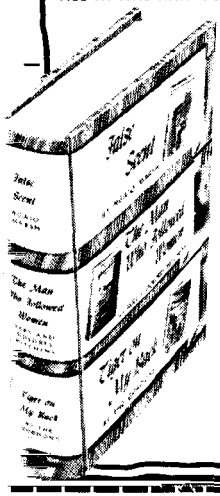

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